DOCTOR WHO

NOVELLAS

SHELL SHOCK

SIMON A FORWARD

Simon A Forward

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Foreword by Guy N Smith

Just when I thought that my own personal Hall of Fame of Fictional Heroes was complete and unlikely to be added to, yet another character made an instant impression on me in late 1963. I had always been an avid fan of boys books and British comics and this latest hero slotted perfectly into my list, second only to the legendary Dan Dare of Eagle.

I am glad that I found Doctor Who at the very beginning of his career when the inimitable William Hartnell was cast in the title role. Everybody has their own particular favourite Doctor but my loyalties are divided between Colin Baker, whom I met whilst an episode was being filmed at Blists Hill, in Shropshire, and Peter Cushing whom I knew and corresponded with in the years prior to his death. Cushing had never actually starred in any of the BBC TV series, but he gave an excellent portrayal of Doctor Who in Dr Who and the Daleks (1965), and Daleks Invasion Earth 2150 AD (1966), two feature length films.

Although I had my favourites during the long-running television series, I cannot honestly say that there was any Doctor whom I disliked, although new ones sometimes took a few episodes for me to warm to them. From the makers point of view, this series had a distinct advantage in that new Doctors were part of the on-going make-up of a Time Lord, so fresh actors presented no problems regarding their portrayal.

Although marketed as juvenile science fiction, which it was, Doctor Who soon accumulated a legion of adult fans as it rapidly gained cult status. It was unique, and I again make no apology for likening it to Dan Dare, as it was intrinsically an adventure series which had an advantage over the latter in that it could be set in any location at any period of time. Thus we had a delightful mix of historic, contemporary and futuristic themes which avoided the dangers of repetition.

Related merchandise flooded the market, naturally, but my own magpie instincts led me to something a little more realistic than mass-manufactured models and the like.

An opportunity arose to acquire an original blue wooden police box of the 1960s, only 629 of which were ever made before they were discontinued, with a blue light in perfect working order. Some restoration was necessary, but it still stands in my front drive as a

memorial to one of the most famous characters ever to appear on television. I confess that, for myself, it is also a reminder of two of my other favourite heroes, Dixon of Dock Green and PC 49, but it has attracted much passing interest from members of the public. Some years ago a family group of ramblers crowded our front gate in near disbelief at what they saw and enquired if the object in question was really a TARDIS. My wife replied, Of course, to which the inevitable Does it work? question followed.

Yes, she replied, keeping a straight face, but my husband isnt here at the moment to explain all about it. Hes a Time Lord, you see! The children in the party were clearly over-awed.

In fact, The Doctor Who Technical Manual, written by Mark Harris and published by Severn House in 1983, is the focal point of the somewhat cramped interior. I have yet to master the technology but, if I ever do, then it will represent a considerable saving on my monthly petrol bill!

Over the years Doctor Who novelisations have not excited me even though the Target series, mostly by Terrance Dicks, were well written and authentic. They paled into insignificance compared with my visual memories of the television episodes, possibly because I remembered many of the original storylines. The World Distributors annuals, however, were somewhat more interesting as they contained some factual articles.

Original novellas, though, such as those published by Telos Publishing, are a different ball game for they do not have a celluloid rival with which to compete or be compared with.

I have a particular affinity with Shell Shock and this will occupy a prime place in my collection for purely personal reasons. Such is my revulsion towards crabs, whatever their size, that I am allergic to their meat, and it was this which inspired my novel Night of the Crabs in 1976, which proved to be a bestseller, spawning five sequels over the next decade and a host of short stories.

Crabs are nothing new on the horror/sf scene. In the 1930s Mystery Stories No. 4

carried a crab story with a cover illustration of one of these monsters. Then, in 1956, Allied Artists/Roger Corman filmed Attack of the Crab Monsters. Doubtless there were other crab stories but it seems that my own fear of these crustaceans is shared by many others.

Soon after Night of the Crabs became the favourite beach read of that unprecedented summer of 1976, the film rights were bought by Amicus Films/Milton Subotsky whose initial plans were to film it under the title King Crab. Interestingly, it was Subotsky who scripted the two full-length feature films of Doctor Who so he clearly saw crabs as a marketable commodity.

For some reason Subotsky never made the film. He died some time later and I consigned the possibility of a movie to history. Then, quite by chance, I discovered that a film under the title of Island Claws had been distributed in the USA by Vestron Videos. By this time my Night of the Crabs had a cult following and I received detailed letters from fans on the other side of the Atlantic who claimed to recognize as many as four of my crabs plots incorporated in this film. Eventually, I managed to obtain a copy of the video and I have to agree with them. The video was clearly a low-budget production, deprived of modern computer enhancement technology, so the only crab one sees is the big one (King Crab) and, even then, not in too much detail! The hordes of attacking crustaceans keep to the shadows and one just hears their incessant clicking.

Crabs appeared in just one televised Doctor Who adventure, a Patrick Troughton tale called The Macra Terror, which I missed at the time. However Simon A Forwards book, Shell Shock, has succeeded in sending a tingling up my spine and a prickling in the nape of my neck. Crabs are bad enough, but intelligent crabs …

Guy N Smith, Shropshire

Dark waters crawl around Scroungers shell. They displace his concentration as well as the surrounding volume.

Something is moving, up on the main deck. It knocks into part of the superstructure, and sends a shockwave of sound reverberating throughout the dead hull.

Scrounger gives up cutting, retracts his welder and raises his eyestalks to search along the hull of the wreck.

The main deck lies at a steep angle, so possibly the intruder just lacks a good purchase on the barnacled metal. Equally possibly, the intruder is just too large for its own good. And yet there is the unnerving suggestion that it wants to move quietly.

Scrounger risks a sweep of his lighting array, but even the main beam dissipates swiftly in the ocean night, falling impotently on the crumpled flank of hull rising above him. The feeble illumination catches no sign of movement up there, but he can feel the steady soft beat of it vibrating through his shell and his insides and up the length of his eyestalks.

He knows this wreck well. That collision came from a little way forard of the bridge, which puts the intruder uncomfortably close to directly overhead. He feels its mass hovering over him, like a black storm-cloud in a watery sky.

Scrounger is not overly superstitious, but in a lengthy and eventful career he has come to know that there are things sinister, predatory things that prowl the currents, things that lurk under the sea bed and things that go bump in the ocean night. Secret, inexplicable things, like his own past. Things that threaten to catch up on you when you least expect it.

The intruder, Scrounger knows, is one of those things. It is taking extra special care now to move silently, crossing the steep incline of the deck above perhaps to peer down on him. But silence is an impossibility here, even for the stealthiest of predators, because the sound, the feel of that motion, creeps through the water and through the hull into Scroungers shell and deep into his nerves. It travels his thoughts like signals along a wire.

Scrounger feels the impulse to shake himself free of it, but he is frozen, lest his own movement gives his position away; though he feels, without knowing at all why or how, that the intruder already knows exactly where to find him.

It is a paranoid, irrational fear. But it is as solid and massive as the surrounding water and just as impossible to ignore. The fact is, there is nothing in this particular field of wrecks to interest a common predator. Scrounger himself has come a dangerously long way to get here. The wrecked tanker was once a haven for all sorts of marine life, but all of that was harvested long ago. All that is left are the metal bones of the stricken hull; a comparatively rich mine for the salvager, but a bare larder for any hunters.

There is nothing living to be had here. Except Scrounger.

It is an obvious realisation that only aggravates his paranoia. But paranoia or no, he knows there is something up there looking down at

him. He knows, moreover, it is something he ought to be afraid of, something he ought to run from.

Whats worse, Scrounger has an idea who it might be. And it is definitely far too large for its own good. Or anyone elses.

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The shockwave slammed into the small of Peris back and set her flailing in the

water like a wet rag doll. It rolled on past her like thunder and left her hanging

there, the air tanks of her scuba gear doing their best to replace all the wind that had been so brutally knocked out of her.

She fought to get a handle on her senses and take control of her panicked breathing.

Her eyes searched around frantically from inside her mask. What the hell had that been?

The twin cones of light from her head-mounted flashlights were too weak to tell her anything, and suddenly she felt the full weight of the ocean above and around her.

She could just make out a few faint ripples of daylight writhing like ghostly snakes overhead.

Peri floated on the spot, getting something of a grip and reasoning things through as best she could. Her wetsuit felt tight on her back, where she knew there were bruises flowering already, but she counted her blessings. Whatever had slapped her, it hadnt damaged the air tanks, and her mouth had held on to the respirator. Added to which, she was still alive.

And that was always a major plus.

The seabed below her was a hostile country, a haunted forest of torn and twisted structures, shrouded in an aquatic night sky. Shed managed only a partial exploration so far. Her flashlight beams had picked out the hard lines and edges of warships, many with ragged, gaping mouths in their sides as though they were screaming into the darkness. Weed and coral had moved in en masse to colonise the graveyard, and schools of fish meandered in and out and between the

wrecks, like faintly shimmering clouds rolling silently here and there over the forbidding landscape. Just occasionally, Peris eyes had been quick enough to catch a glimpse of shadowy predators, lurking in the bowels of the wrecked vessels, waiting to snatch at any passing prey.

Thankfully, she hadnt seen any more active predators this worlds equivalent of sharks, for example patrolling the area, but with such a tempting menu on the move here, she wasnt about to rule out the possibility. Not least because that shockwave must surely have made life a lot easier for predators: many of those clouds of fish that she had seen were no longer shimmering; they had been broken apart and were floating lifeless up towards the surface.

This already desolate landscape had been devastated by an underwater storm, and that effectively put an end to Peris explorations for the foreseeable future. What really counted now was to find out where it had come from and what, if anything, had sent it her way.

Despite the shock of it, she wasnt quite paranoid enough to believe it had been anything directed against her personally.

Assuming it had been some sort of explosion and it sure as hell felt like it had!

some basic reasoning, once shed managed to reorientate herself, led her to the simple, stark conclusion that it must have originated from the old derelict. The only thing that stopped her from seizing on that immediately was her reluctance to accept it; she argued against the possibility all the way, until it solidified in her mind, horribly, as the only inescapable answer.

Horribly, because that derelict had been the only thing floating on the surface for as far as the eye could see. As far, even, as the TARDIS could see which was why, in all the expanse of world ocean, the Doctors precious, erratic ship had chosen to set them down on its rusty old decks. It was there that, while the Doctor chose to engage in a spot of fishing, she had decided out of boredom to indulge in a spot of underwater exploration despite the Doctors cautionary and, she thought, characteristically pompous warnings and reminders of her near-drowning in Lanzarote.

She half laughed and half cried as she imagined his I told you so reverberating through the waters along with the last echoes of the shockwave. But the joke turned bad before shed even fully thought it:

if the explosion had sunk the derelict, then the Doctor was dead.

The derelict hulk had looked so fragile and brittle, barely afloat when theyd arrived and stepped out of the TARDIS. Shed even remarked that she hoped the TARDIS

had taken care to land gently on the deck, which had naturally provoked the Doctor into one of his perennial protestations that the TARDIS didnt, as such, land.

Still, the point remained the same: the floating wreck couldnt have stayed afloat under the force of such an impact. Most likely she would have shattered into pieces.

And down would have come Doctor, TARDIS and all.

Peris heart and spirits started sinking along with her minds eye view of the Doctor and his ship. Suddenly the fear of abandonment, of isolation, and of being a castaway on an alien world took on a mass as substantial and overbearing as the weight of the ocean around her.

Still, that prospect was far less immediate than the concern for her air supply, and the need to know what had happened to the Doctor. She wasnt about to greatly and prematurely exaggerate reports of his death, just to have him turn up at his own funeral with that annoyingly superior smirk on his face.

The idea was enough, for now, to steel her determination. Kicking back with her flippers, she drove herself towards the surface, chasing the clouds of dead fish.

Peri broke through the waves and pushed back her mask, ready to suck in some real air and let out some of the panic shed held in on her way up. She scanned the surface in every direction, turning her body the full three-sixty, but with no landmarks around she was starting to doubt her sense of direction, and her panic was returning by degrees as she grew less and less sure of where she should even start looking for the crippled hulk.

It was a very moot point, she realised. Given that it was nowhere to be seen.

Peri felt crushed, with the weight of water around her and the pressure of tears dammed up inside her. Regardless how many pieces it was in, down was the only way the wreck could have gone. The TARDIS, planted on her decks, would have gone straight down with

her.

But what about the Doctor? Surely his reactions, his resilience, would have saved him? She should have spotted him somewhere around here, treading water and taking stock of his situation with a suitably dismayed expression. It occurred to her that he may have swum straight down after the TARDIS, and she wondered if his alien physiognomy would allow him to pursue his ship to the seabed without the aid of apparatus. It was all pretty pointless speculation though.

Just as pointless, she found herself shouting: Doctor! She threw the word as far as she could, all over the ocean. She might as well have been mute.

She took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself and get her thought processes working properly. She figured she was just going to have to dive some more and scour the seabed for the TARDIS herself. Then she started worrying about the possibility that she might not have shut the TARDIS door after her when shed come out with her scuba gear, and had all sorts of visions of flooded corridors and control rooms, fish eyes blinking back at the lights on the console assuming, of course, that they werent sparking uselessly by then. Peri shook her head and told herself to put the brakes on that kind of thinking. It wasnt about to get her anywhere.

But there was still the question of how much air she had left in her tanks.

Shed taken her dive fairly leisurely, but had also kept a close eye on the time, so she knew that what she had left ought to last her for around another twenty minutes.

Enough for, well, not much of a search especially given her serious doubts as to the direction in which she ought to start looking. This was bad. Very bad.

The ache in her chest was growing tighter at the thought that, possibly, just for once in his long and dangerous career, the Doctor might have actually failed to scrape through and survive by the skin of his teeth. Even cats had to exhaust their nine lives eventually.

Still, anxiety, like stupid thoughts, wasnt about to get her anywhere. She had just to shoulder it and carry it with her.

She felt the weight on her all the way, as she replaced her mask and

flipped herself over for what would be her last dive.

By the time Peri surfaced again, her tanks were drained and so was she.

Her search had proven futile. Shed figured it would, and her prior pessimism only deepened her deflated feeling now, in the wake of her fruitless and exhausting effort. The TARDIS was down there somewhere, she could be certain of that; but that kind of certainty is no comfort at all. She had no way to reach it, even if she knew where to look.

Yeah, go ahead and cry, Peri reproached herself, the instant the tears pushed their way out. Thatll help. No sign of the Doctor, no refuge in the TARDIS, adrift in an alien ocean, not a scrap of land in sight or anything else to aim for, so obviously crying is Just the thing.

She bit her pouting lip and thought furiously, getting angry with herself and then grabbing hold of that anger to see if she could make any use of it. Clearly she could tread water for a while. But all the time in the world wasnt going to help if there were zero options to think through.

Her choices were minimal, to say the least: wait here and hope for rescue, for some sort of marine cavalry to come charging over the horizon to her aid; or swim who knew where? And if she swam, which direction should she swim in? Did it matter? As far as that went, the world, she supposed, was her oyster.

And she couldnt say she was ever fond of oysters.

In the absence of help materialising from anywhere and she knew she couldnt grasp at that kind of straw before it actually presented itself she had to swim.

Somewhere. Anywhere. Her limbs were already beginning to tire and grow heavy, and that was just from keeping herself in the same place. Waiting was too much hard work for no gain at all. Maybe she wouldnt be any better off swimming, but she could at least imagine herself feeling marginally better about being on the move. About doing something.

If hope had deserted her, she could at least go looking for some.

Drawing in a few deep breaths again, to firm herself for the task ahead, Peri picked her direction and propelled herself into an easy

breaststroke, still scanning the surface around her for any sign of the Doctors curls or that lurid coat popping up above the waves. Anything to make her feel less alone. Before too long, she gave up on that and just focused on her swim, switching between her breaststroke and a flipper-powered crawl. Occasionally she flipped herself onto her back for a spell of rest, while keeping herself on the move.

Time dragged and blurred, the featureless ocean stretched out endlessly ahead of her, but she felt sure she must have covered a good distance. She could feel it in her burning muscles, and the exertion was enough to instil in her a gathering confidence.

But she knew that her reserves, no matter how they built up then, would be limited.

At intervals, she broke off from swimming and trod water quietly, trying hard not to think about how heavy and strained her breathing sounded; trying harder not to think about the fire in her lungs and in her arms and legs. And trying not to notice how much more frequent those intervals were becoming. As time stretched to apparent eternity, light faded from her world and consciousness finally abandoned her.

When Peri drowned, she was blissfully, mercifully asleep.

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Scrounger recalls that on his last visit to this wreck, he even went so far as to claim it as his own, expending precious battery power to etch some graffiti in one of the bulkheads with his laser cutter; writing his name the way Ranger had taught him in the sand on the Beach.

That time he came looking for a few more tools and accessories with which to furnish his shell. The ship was more than just a tanker: it was a full-blown auxiliary, Stevedore class, laden with gear and supplies for all sorts of units, naval and otherwise. The wreck was deserted even back then, with just the skeletons of the crew to avoid as he explored its innards. All of those bones had been picked clean, of course, probably not long after Scrounger had sent the ship to the bottom and killed all its crew with the simple placement of a mine.

Just doing his job. And the voice from the Memory had commended him highly that day.

A Stevedore class was a prize target apparently.

Of course, the voice and his job are gone now. There is just the

Beach, and Ranger, and the others. But long before any of this, Scrounger counted that voice his only friend, sharing his shell with it somehow even though he knew that she he thought of the voice as a she really lived in the Memory. She would assign him his missions and make him feel good whenever he pulled them off. That was the way life worked.

But the voice fell silent one day. Scrounger has been on his own since then, having to think up his own missions, his own tasks; having to fend for himself. This is the way life works now.

The Memory is still there, somewhere: distant, out there in the ocean, but also deep inside him at the same time. There is a connection there, like an invisible, intangible cable; he doesnt understand it in the slightest, just knows it is there, feels it.

It is a reservoir of knowledge, a pool he can dip into any time he needs to learn something new, any time he feels the need to expand his repertoire and grow. An immeasurably useful resource before, it is infinitely more so now that he is his own guide. It is another kind of treasure trove, another kind of ocean. One with which Ranger always claims to be too familiar.

To Scrounger, that sounds like a profound and enviable understanding, and he longs to share in it. But he knows he has to make allowances for Ranger: he can see the scars of a great deal of suffering in the mans eyes, as clear and sharp as his own name now etched in the Stevedores bulkhead. So it is something to be pitied as well, and a knowledge for which Scrounger will have to be patient. And Scrounger can be patient, he knows, for a friend like Ranger. Ranger is an even better friend than the Memory was; a physical friend, outside his shell, with a voice that sounds on the air. But he too is fading away.

Scrounger is starting to feel very alone again, with the fear that soon, perhaps, all he will have left is the Memory.

He cant help wondering: what if everyone else can tap into the Memory the way he can? These days it would mean that even his enemies could be party to all that knowledge. Its a possibility that robs him of every advantage, and much of his courage.

The noisy intruder up on the main deck is suddenly scarier.

Scrounger isnt about to waste time equipping his shell on this occasion. No, all such thoughts are duly abandoned. Medical supplies

for Ranger are the key objective for which he has ventured this far, and he is determined to succeed, so he will have to skirt hastily around the base of the wreck, where the hull disappears into the seabed, and clamber in through the gaping crater he put in the vessels side. Theres the risk, he knows, of trapping himself in there.

But he knows he has to do it, all the same. For Ranger.

And maybe, just maybe, in the darkness and the maze of the ships innards, he can lose his enemy. Find a hiding place. Wait it out until the monster grows impatient and goes off in search of juicier morsels. But Scrounger has a nagging suspicion as to who his stalker might be, and an unnerving, despairing conviction that this predator will never give up.

Scrounger, lighting array shut off and feeling his way around the hull, can sense the intruders eyes on him like something crawling on his flesh, inside his shell. He realises that he is knocking and scraping against the hull, telegraphing his every movement through the metal.

There is heavier movement, echoed back to him by way of an answer.

Something scrabbles weightily over the side of the ship above, and the stir of currents sets Scroungers eyestalks twitching as it drops like a rock through the water.

Scrounger breaks into a sprint. Theres nothing to be gained any more in being stealthy. Just everything to be gained in being fast.

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The Doctor smoothed out the sand and gave it a final pat. Small as the grave was, its digging had taken much more out of him than building the grandest of sandcastles would have done. It was an especial pity, on such a fine morning as this, to be burying another companion.

Hed risen to greet the dawn and set off on his now customary stroll along the shore with a puffed up chest, shoulders thrown back and curly mop held high in the breeze, which hed sucked into his lungs with a new-found vigour and optimism. In the words of the Beatles, hed been sure he would get by with a little help from his friends.

The bubble had burst, his chest and his mood been deflated, in the instant he had come across the remains littering a patch of sand at the far end of the Beach. Death was becoming as much a part of his daily routine here as his morning constitutional.

The remains had been few and far between, but still more that had been left of poor Snapdragon. That first time, four mornings earlier, the Doctor had been forced to settle for propping the broken halves of the deceaseds shell in the sand as a rudimentary headstone.

A hollow sort of ritual.

Still, it was a ritual that seemed to have taken on a tremendous importance to the sadly diminished congregation that flocked around him on these occasions. Each time he finished the burial, they seemed to look so hopefully to him for something more.

All he could give were a few scraps of words thrown over the grave, to try to inspire and strengthen the living. Whether that was what they were expecting from him or not, the Doctor had found himself lapsing into the habit of pronouncing a meagre eulogy at each simple funeral.

It was the best he could offer them. More constructive than the digging.

Rangers absence from todays assembly made the mood even more downcast than usual.

But the Doctor knew they had to make allowances for the man: he was badly in need of more rest.

Whatever was preying on the Beach community, it had come upon Ranger in his sleep.

Two nights after the Doctors arrival, it had stolen past where he lay dozing, just yards outside the mouth of Rangers cave, and gone prowling in to inflict a grievous wound: a wound that would have been even more horrific if the Doctor hadnt jumped awake and come running at Rangers profane cries. Huge and bulky as the thing had been, it had scuttled quickly away before he had been able to catch more than a glimpse of it in the fluttering glow from their campfire.

The monster had found an alternative victim out there in the night: little Snapdragon. And it had apparently had little trouble finding others in the days and nights since.

This morning, all that remained for the Doctor to do was to stand over the fresh grave and utter a few solemn words for the latest fallen companion.

Some way behind him, the Doctor could hear the whispered crashes of

the waves rolling in, and he was just beginning to feel the suns early light warming his neck and shoulders. As he surveyed the expectant eyes all around him and considered his words, he was painfully aware that somewhere back there, beyond the horizon, Peri was another lost companion.

Today was time, he believed, to reflect not on what they had lost, but on all they had achieved since his arrival.

Day one, and the Doctor woke to groggy darkness, a heavy head and a mouthful of salt and sand. His coat lay waterlogged about him and the waves lapped at his ankles. Let there be light, he thought to himself, rather egocentrically, and opened his eyes.

All right, he qualified, perhaps not so much of it all at once, thank you very much.

He blinked and poked his tongue over his lips to push away the unpleasant taste. He could feel his curls hanging all lank and frizzy about his face, sense the salt-and-vinegar smell of the ocean filling his nose. As his eyes acclimatised, he focused on the creature that was yanking at his sleeve and threatening to rip the fabric.

Do you mind? he forced out, only to hear his normally stentorian bellow emerge as a dry croak which simply wouldnt do if he was to have any chance of taking charge of the situation.

Of course, the first step was to establish that situation, because for the moment all he knew was that this creature, somewhat like a crab, was tugging at his sleeve and, he noted with surprise, managing to drag his substantial weight, inch by inch, away from the sea.

The Doctor lifted his head and stared with a furrowed brow into the creatures eyes, which stood alert on their stalks. Impressive, he said. I feel its only fair to warn you, if youre intending to eat me, that Ive been well and truly marinated. Any flavour I might have had in me will have been fatally overpowered by now.

On reflection, it wasnt the most effective of deterrents to a creature used to a diet of seafood. However, reason suggested that if he had indeed been on the menu, the creature along with any of its fellows who might have come across his floating form out there would have tucked into him at sea; dragging him here would have involved a deal of effort, disproportionate to the luxury of staging their banquet on dry land. That and an undeniable glimmer of curiosity in the creatures eyes were sufficient reassurance for now.

Shaking some life into himself, the Doctor pushed out with his arms and tested his ability to raise himself from the horizontal. His muscles were shaky, but he was fairly sure that if he could Just get himself standing, run on the spot a bit, get the veins pumping, he could take things from there. He practically threw himself up onto his feet, causing the startled creature to retreat a short distance. He looked down at it with a studied curiosity.

How do you do? Im known as the Doctor. There was no point, he supposed, in proffering his hand. Now, who, or what, might you be, I wonder?

The eyes bobbed on their stalks, meeting the Doctors scrutiny like those of a seasoned poker player; giving nothing away. The Doctor frowned, inflating his cheeks.

In the absence of any spoken response, he supposed he was expected to provide his own answers.

The creature was somewhat like a crab, but that was as far as it went. And he quickly realised that there were dozens of others, stationed here and there amid the rocks and sand, and now scuttling toward him from all over the beach. Lilliputians flocking to make what they would of their new Gulliver.

Their new Gulliver, because the Doctor had gradually become aware that he was being watched by another pair of eyes; eyes that didnt dance on stalks but stared levelly out from the shadowed depths of a nearby cave.

As beaches went, the Beach was nothing very remarkable. It was as if the elements had taken a broad, shallow bite out of the islands coastline with what must have been a very crude set of dentures, leaving about a quarter-mile stretch of ragged gouges down the relatively low but sheer cliffs. On the shore around these gouges, like giant crumbs at their base, lay numerous rocks and boulders, predominantly orange-brown in colour but stained and streaked with dark greys like the cliffs. The sand was a pallid ochre, the consistency of light brown sugar, but with coarser grains out toward the waves.

A stream trickled down over scattered pebbles just to one side of the cave, over on the right. It acted like a sort of moat, dividing the Beach into two distinct and unequal areas, the territory outside the cave being the smaller by far, but all the more exclusive for that.

Clumps of seaweed, with great distended bladders, bobbed and

swayed on the incoming waves. They were anchored in place, with lines netting, perhaps? just visible between them under the water, marking out some sort of offshore enclosure. And an expansive stretch of the sand along to the left looked to have been turfed up and ploughed over rather haphazardly.

All in all, it was decidedly unprepossessing. But on the day he washed up here, the Doctor knew that this was going to be home for some time to come.

That theres Scrounger, Ranger explained. Hes the one who brought you to the Beach. The Doctor discerned the capitalisation clearly; it was as if there was only one in the world. He and a couple of the others.

It was only a short while later that first day, and the Doctor was busy brushing rapidly-drying sand out of his curls and drilling with his little finger for excess water in his ears. Ranger, meanwhile, despite some obvious social inhibitions, was handling the introductions. It seemed he had names for all the creatures; names that the Doctor prepared to commit to memory, already beginning to wonder how long he might find himself stuck here.

Scrounger, the Doctors principal rescuer, was a fine specimen. He had a robust shell, made of some sort of plastic, maybe fifty centimetres across, although its precise dimensions were difficult to gauge with any accuracy due to the variety of mechanical and electronic attachments that sprouted all over its surface. The Doctor picked out a laser cutter, a small welder, a drill, numerous probes and blades, an array of electronic implements in snug little pouches, some units that had to be power packs fixed to the outer casing, additional scraps of metal welded in place, and a few crusts of barnacles for a spot of extra armour.

Hmm, a regular Swiss Army crab. Pleased to meet you.

Earlier, the creatures shape had been even more deformed, clad in a brown-green harness of the apparently common seaweed, the bloated sacs that lined each strand no doubt acting as a highly effective buoyancy aid.

There was no mistaking a sort of wistful intelligence in those eyes, standing to attention on their stalks as if better to take in the Doctors full height.

Scrounger was out foraging, volunteered Ranger, nodding to himself

as though getting his facts straight. He was hoping to get on board that derelict of yours, scrounge around. Somebody beat him to it, sank it. Ranger eyeballed the Doctor directly. You were all that was left.

The Doctor made a frown of his whole face, puzzling over a bizarre picture not quite a memory, since he was fairly sure he would have been unconscious at the time

of this Scrounger, buoyed up on seaweed water-wings, kicking those clawed legs of his and powering through the water, a tug pulling a brightly-coloured ocean liner of considerably greater beam and draught. Given that the creature had managed to haul his ample frame onto dry land, the Doctor couldnt doubt his strength on top of his other obvious qualities.

So, assessed the Doctor at length, trying not to sound too ungrateful. Im salvage? Im flattered.

Rangers eyes clouded over. Guess somebody out there is still fighting the War.

Yes, the Doctor spun the word out, stretching it to make room for his thoughts, thats really something I need to find out about. Who attacked that derelict? And why? Not to mention, what happened here? Questions to be added to a very long list, he realised.

Dont go asking me! Ranger roared until he was hoarse, hands clamped over his eyes and head aimed at the sand between his knees. I dont have answers, okay!

Very well, murmured the Doctor, at least allowing himself to appear chastened. He would have to leave it for the moment. He tucked his hands away in his pockets. In your own time.

Ranger cracked a grin at that. Welcome to the Beach, he said. And even though he was managing to hold the smile, the Doctor couldnt help feeling that, as welcomes went, it was a frosty one.

Ranger flexed an arm, then scratched furiously at his stubble. Some kind of peace settled slowly over him, and it looked as if he was counting time. Then it was as if normal service had been resumed, the pretence of it, if anything, more troubling to the Doctor than Rangers violent outburst. The man went on with the introductions, beckoning to each member of the community in turn as he announced their names.

That theres Snapdragon. The other little guys are Scuttlebutt, Mouse, Dungbeetle, Nipper. There youve got Dozer, Toolbox, Crane you want to watch him, bit of an attitude Thinktank, Bucket, Spade …

Generally they scurried up to present themselves, some of them nervously, like children greeting royalty. But it was plain from Rangers stone-dead eyes that the Doctor was only a guest here, a tenant. The Beach was Rangers realm.

By day two, the Doctors coat had dried out, of course, but he kept finding veins of sand clinging to the creases. Determined that, when he finally left this place, he would not be taking half the Beach with him, he would wipe at them irritably with his hand, or whip off the coat and soundly beat it against a rock to try to get rid of the offending grains.

On one occasion as he was doing this he caught a movement, like a flinch, just on the lip of the cave mouth, and realised that his rather frenzied actions must have disturbed poor Ranger. He froze and, turning as gingerly as if hed just trodden on a Fabergé egg, laid out the coat and left it draped on the rock. He held up his hands in a gesture of apology to the man watching him. Sort of watching him. It was difficult to be sure what those eyes were looking at.

This was a graven image of a man, clad in the remnants of combat fatigues, huddled against the side of his cave, head pressed into the rock, like a frightened child hugging his pillow deep in the shadow of a lingering nightmare. His gaze was a blank wall on which the outside world was projected. Of the images playing out on the other side, there was not even so much as a silhouette. All the same, the Doctor could tell they were there.

The Doctor dipped his brow and tipped his head inquisitively. Is anybody home?

He couldnt be sure if the glib tone provoked any response inside the man; it didnt seem so much as to dent the surface. Either way, Ranger answered without lifting his head: Wouldnt know where that was. His eyes moved to cover the Doctors stealthy approach. The warning was implicit, and the Doctor stopped. Ranger said: Got any idea, yourself?

Home? The Doctor gave it a moments thought, and wanted to say that it was out there, under the sea. But hed lost more than his home out there; and, in any case, now was the time for building bridges to this man who was, contrary to the assertions of John Donne, most

definitely an island. I cant say I have. Im as lost as you are.

Ranger looked directly at the Doctor for the first time. Hard. The Beach is no place to go dressing like a clown.

The Doctor pondered that and considered objecting to the insult, but knew when to let sartorial matters slide. He was having what amounted to a conversation with Ranger, and was keen to pursue it. Youre probably right. But colour is an important part of life, wouldnt you say?

Emotion shivered up Rangers face like a sidewinder across a sand dune. Black and white, thats all there is. And when the colours run together, theres only grey.

The Doctor held onto his next words carefully for a moment. What happened here, Ranger?

War. What else do you need to know?

Well, I could be wrong, but Im fairly sure Im going to need more than that.

A grunt from Ranger. They all pulled out anyhow. Its gone. Its over.

So Im expected to settle for guesswork, am I? the Doctor challenged.

But Ranger clearly wasnt going to take it up: further details were not going to be forthcoming. Confession was concluded before it had begun. The Doctor tempered his frustration with a degree of sympathy.

Rangers condition was all too easy to diagnose: shell shock. The clearest symptoms were in his eyes; in the way that, when they werent just dead, he looked at the world as though through a splintered lens. That, and the way he carried himself on the sporadic occasions when he moved, as if his body was brittle; a broken home.

Trust man to have come up with something capable of inflicting wounds that even time could never heal.

All right then. Ill give it my best go based on what Ive seen so far. The Doctor ran through the few salient points in his mind, and just started applying a little thought like glue. An ocean world, largely speaking, rich in resources. Rival factions two at least competing to exploit all of it. Corporations, Id imagine; people with plenty of clout and money

to burn. You said theyd all gone, so there cant have been any indigenous forces involved and the technology Ive seen certainly appears to be of human construction.

Global warfare waged mostly at sea, since theres not much else in the way of battleground. Dreadful attrition, spiralling costs. Until one day the investment levels cross that crucial line where the returns simply arent big enough or wont be reaped soon enough to justify a continued conflict. The parties, or whats left of them, come to some sort of negotiated truce and pull out.

The Doctor took Rangers half startled expression and nervous rocking motion as confirmation. It looked, in any case, as if they were all he was going to get for the present.

Let me see, what else. Oh yes, marine warfare and submarine warfare. The naval contingents supplemented by marine troops, perfectly adapted for amphibious assaults, mine emplacements, demolitions, espionage, sabotage and a host of other operations; or rather, perfectly engineered, I should say. He tried to catch Rangers attention, prodding him with a spear-tipped look. Thats what all your friends are, isnt it?

Genetically engineered soldier-crabs, Cancerian marines, capable of adaptation and self-modification, and of upgrading to larger accommodations when they outgrow their current shells.

The Doctor stopped, suddenly aware that Ranger was saying something, murmuring it to the breeze. Something like. Rangers words were fully formed, but they came out with only half a sound. Something like.

The Doctor crouched down, bringing his gaze in line with Rangers, even though the mans eyes werent ready to meet his own. You knew a lot about how Scrounger rescued me, about the derelict. Which makes it something more than intelligent guesswork. How do you communicate with them, Ranger? How do they tell you things?

I get to see the world through their eyes. Ranger bit down on nothing. Sometimes.

How? Some sort of interface?

But Rangers expression had closed down, telling the Doctor plainly that he wasnt about to get any more. For the minute, Ranger preferred to answer a different question.

Because its better than seeing it through mine.

That afternoon, Ranger scuttled out from the cave at such a rate of knots that the Doctor, wading in the shallows near the shore, felt him coming before he saw him, and almost lost his footing as he span round and tried to gauge the mans charge and brace himself for a neat sidestep. His attention found a ready focus on the tip of the bayonet fixed to the rifle in Rangers hands.

Ranger splashed into the water at speed, but pushed on past the Doctor as if he wasnt there. The Doctor whirled about again, to see Ranger spearing around savagely, as a starving man might stab at the fly in his soup. These fits of thrashing were accompanied by raw, feral yells from Ranger as he attacked and attacked again, close to the line of nets.

Fish slipped snake-like around the Doctors calves, fleeing the sudden turbulence.

Something else moved through the water nearby, and for a moment the Doctor thought that the cut and thrust of the bayonet had loosed a clump of weed from its anchor.

But no, there was some sort of dark shape, described in glimpses between the waves and the churn of white. Whatever it was, the ferocity of Rangers attacks was the perfect cover for its getaway.

Not only had the Doctor discovered the nature of the netting a corral for fish, fashioned from combat webbing and weighted clumps of seaweed but also he had now come to learn just how much it was valued by Ranger.

He should, of course, have guessed, and could only attribute his slowness to the other matters on his mind. He took a couple of careful steps backwards as Ranger started to snap out of it. The man seethed, hunting the waves for any sign of the predator.

But of course it was gone.

Ranger sagged to his knees and wept there, with the waves lapping unfeelingly at his waist. The netting, like so much around Ranger, lay in tatters. Freedom, the Doctor reflected with grim amusement, was being handed to the fish on a plate.

Ranger swore, but there was no energy in the curse. He rolled over and tried to drag himself out of the water, eventually using the rifle to

push himself up onto his feet. He trudged off across the sand, shoulders slumped, and retreated to the safety of his cave.

The Doctor inspected the damage, wondering about the creature that had conducted the raid.

Around him came the sound of renewed splashing. The crabs were scuttling into the water, a number of them circling out wide to close in on the gash in the netting.

They were herding the fish as many as they could back into the corral in …

well, in a pincer movement, the Doctor laughed to himself. He marvelled at their industrious efforts to secure the webbing, retrieve the seaweed buoy and generally effect repairs. They really were a community.

Surprisingly, given his normal prominence, there was no sign of Scrounger amongst them.

The Doctor glanced along the Beach. Another party of crabs, led by the intrepid Scrounger, was making its way across the sand, headed for one of the broken limbs of rock that ascended in what looked like manageable stages to the cliff top.

The Doctor looked back down at the crudely patched corral. The repair was clearly a makeshift one, and no doubt Scroungers team had set off in search of materials with which to effect something more permanent.

These creatures were, the Doctor decided, far more than crabs. They were an inspiration.

It was later that night that the monster returned and attempted to murder Ranger in his sleep. And the Doctor never got to find out if he himself had been on the creatures list of intended victims.

The following morning Scrounger found Snapdragon, or rather what was left of his empty shell, and the Doctor attended to the first of the burials. The Doctors thoughts were heavy with the death; much more so than he would have expected, as though the collective grief of the community had somehow crawled in and found a home inside him.

Perhaps, he surmised, it was actually the weighty realisation that, as with so many other communities before, his arrival here had brought

with it a monster. Something had followed him to the Beach, he was convinced of that now. Quite possibly the same something that had sunk the derelict and the TARDIS, and a good deal more besides.

Last night that monster had taken off with a slice of Rangers arm and a new name, given to him by his victim: Meathook. None of which had anything to do with the Doctor, but he bore the responsibility all the same. Ranger had insisted on attending to his own wound, so the Doctor hadnt even been able to make that practical contribution. The only thing he had been able to do was to watch, and voice his fears about the possibility or rather, the probability of infection.

All these warnings had been dismissed in surly, wordless fashion. The injury had made Ranger even more insular, cutting him off still further from the world. And, as something of a side effect, leaving the Doctor feeling even more alone. For company, all he had now were the crab community and the urge to do something. From those internal depths, though, some faint hope was surfacing, with respect to the TARDIS at least. The first inkling of it had come the previous day, when he had been watching the community working together to repair and re-float the netting around the corral.

Scroungers team had not been all that long in returning, and had brought with it further lengths of combat webbing of the kind ordinarily used as camouflage for vehicles, weapons emplacements, bunkers and the like. That gave an indication, at least, that there might be other potentially useful materials available on the island. It would certainly be worth a look or two. And it was not as if the Doctor was averse to a little exploration from time to time.

To that end, the Doctor struck out energetically along the shore, eyes fixed on the cliff as he scanned for the easiest route up from the Beach. Before hed wandered too far, he heard something scurry up behind him and felt an insistent tugging at the hem of his trousers. He looked down to find Scrounger nipping at his ankles.

Yes? Can I help you?

The animal scampered around his feet and shovelled briskly but gently at some of the turfed sand. With a few scoops, he had exposed a glimpse of metallic plating.

The Doctor studied it, nearly tapped his foot in thought, but then suspended that action immediately. He peered across the patchy stretch of sand all the way ahead as far as the rocks. Ah, he said.

Nothing says possession like a mine, hmm?

If Scrounger got the pun, his eyes came up short on appreciation. He stared up at the Doctor for a few moments longer, then set about smoothing the sand back over the explosive device. The Doctor decided that he was going to need a guide or two on any foraging expeditions. Not to mention some assistance in piecing his scheme together.

Stepping respectfully back from the minefield, he did an about-turn and started striding for the cave.

Whatever he was likely to achieve with any of this, he supposed it was best to consult the landlord first.

Ranger must have been deep at the back of his cave. The Doctor bent inside the entrance, hands in pockets, dipping his head as far as it would go for a better look, but there was no sign of any substance to the shadows back there.

Hello, Ranger? I was wondering if you had any influence at all, and could persuade our crab friends to help me fetch a few materials, lend a claw with a spot of construction and so forth? Nothing too tasking. If youd ask them nicely for me, Id greatly appreciate it. Be out of your way in no time.

The Doctors voice echoed around the rock walls, dying away with no response. The Doctor ho-hummed and turned to walk away.

You can ask them yourself. The cave delivered Rangers answer for him.

Thank you, said the Doctor, and marched off across the Beach to marshal his work force.

They had been busy ever since. On this, the seventh day, there was reason for optimism. Except, of course, for the departed; the latest to fall victim to the monster.

The Doctor threw his head back and sucked in the sea air, for the moment stuck for words.

He felt for these creatures. An unspoken bond had developed over the past days, with all those eyestalks standing in mourning and paying heed to the Doctors softly delivered epitaphs. Moreover, he knew their loss. He and Peri, the TARDIS crew, were a community of two. And

she was not only lost. He had lost her. Even when there is nothing physical

for the dead to leave behind, there is always the responsibility to be inherited by the living. A weight that has to be taken on the shoulders as part of the whole untidy package that is loss.

There was a measure of hope now, of course, taking shape in what they were building together. Even Ranger had stirred himself on occasion to contribute, weakening himself in the process something that had spurred the Doctor to recommend that Scrounger go in search of medical supplies. The intrepid Scrounger had headed off into the sea two days ago. And the Doctor knew he couldnt think about leaving until he had seen this through. Until he had done something, at least, to restore Ranger.

To restore hope.

But for him, underneath the hope, there was still Peri. What about her? What were her chances, realistically? Was she another companion he was going to have to bury?

Without realising it and against all his determination not to relinquish hope on her behalf he had already started digging a shallow grave somewhere inside himself.

.

Scrounger hugs the base of the tanker like a common spider sticks to the skirting boards as it makes its frantic dash for safety. But he knows he is all too visible: visible in the clouds of sand that his scuttling legs kick up from the seabed, detectible too in every stir of current, every brushing collision of his shell against the hull to which he clings so desperately, so uselessly for cover.

Finally, he finds his way in: the ugly hole he put in the tanker himself, with his mine. He scrabbles for a good purchase on the jagged lips, then hauls himself inside.

The ship is a man-made maze, a structure built of hiding places. Scrounger follows a crabs instincts: run for shelter, retreat inside a shell.

He knows the ship inside out. The Memory kindly furnished him with

the layout before he placed his mine. And he has used this entrance before. A couple of sprints and turns will take him to the gutted engine room. Which, worryingly, is where the next noise emanates from.

It is an almighty gong slam, and sets Scroungers world quaking. It can only be bad news.

Scrounger pins himself to the deck, legs hooked into the grating, bracing himself against the backwash. The liquid mass that hits him, rushes over him, tells him that one of the bulkhead doors, battered and crumpled, has slammed closed, blocking off his nearest route to the engine room and all its hiding places. It is a bulkhead door that has hung open since the first time Scrounger came visiting, after he sent this ship to the bottom. So, query: has it now suddenly fallen shut, or was it pushed?

Scrounger sweeps his lighting array around, sending its feeble beams dancing like weeds in a stormy sea. He rotates himself, left and right, searching for another way to run.

Time to go. Anywhere!

Short on ideas, he plain scuttles. He makes a wrong turn and he knows it. Hes scurrying faster and faster down a dead end. Because he is certain now that Meathook is somewhere above and behind him, inside the tanker, following the bouncing lights of his array and every scrape of his limbs transmitted through the decks as he runs for his life.

Even before hes scuttled from the crawlway, Scrounger feels the sheer mass of Meathook dropping from above. Sinking, like hope.

The mass that fell earlier from the main deck must have been a decoy; some debris shoved over the side to set Scrounger fleeing for one of his bolt holes.

But Scrounger isnt through yet. Hes in a blind run, heading forard, because he knows he needs time to think, and for that he needs to put some distance between himself and his pursuer.

He races up a slope, then turns hard a-port and pretty much slides down another. The deck is warped and buckled in places, but the gradients have more to do with the angle at which the wreck is lying.

Theres another bulkhead door, rusted open and hanging on one hinge:

Scrounger remembers when he cut the first hinge and levered himself enough of a gap to scramble through. Hard work, but breaking into a treasure trove was never meant to be easy.

Now, Scrounger forces himself over the bulkhead rim in the same way and drops neatly into the vault. From there, he clambers up a succession of racks and pipes and other fixtures and along the length of a sleek torpedo. Some of the torpedos innards are exposed from where he previously looted its precious warhead and some of its electronics, but Scrounger hasnt time to pause and admire his handiwork. Hes crawling rapidly over the other crates of munitions, making for one of the loading tubes. The Stevedore is a supply ship: the munitions, like the fuel, get delivered to other hungry vessels by tube.

He has found a way out.

But the angle is steep and the pipe cramped and long. And already, he can hear giant pincers snapping and scraping at the crack in the bulkhead door behind him.

Scrounger thinks that maybe Meathooks traded in his shell for a larger one; that maybe he wont be able to fit in here and will Just sit outside, snapping his pincers furiously, frustratedly into the room. The shockwave from each snap hits Scrounger like a hammer blow. His strengthened shell can withstand the impact, but his nerves are good and rattled. Even more so than they already were.

There is a water and steel earthquake inside the room. Meathook has somehow severed the other hinge. The door has fallen.

His brain ringing like a clapper in a bell, Scrounger heaves the tube cover closed; it is a minimal obstacle for something the size of Meathook, but he has to try. Claws grabbing at every available hold, he half pulls himself and half scoots up to the closed end of the cylinder. Back against the wall.

Now theres only a tube door and one short fall between Scrounger and the open seabed. A sealed tube door that hasnt been opened since this doomed vessel put to sea. He fires up his laser cutter, and watches the beam falter as it boils the water around it. Low on battery power. This is going to be tight.

Scrounger knows he has only himself to blame. What wonderful irony: he has run himself into a corner of his own making.

Scrounger doesnt want to hide here for the rest of his life. Scrounger wants to get back to the Beach.

But all too soon, Meathook comes knocking.

Meathook, Scrounger has convinced himself, was a monster long before he came to the Beach. He just started getting better at it from the day he arrived.

The first Scrounger knew of that arrival was when he found Snapdragons pathetic miniature shell lying cracked open in a rock pool, just meagre remnants of him left inside it, like the last few flakes of tuna that have to be scraped out of the can.

Scrounger tapped the shell gently with his claw, knowing already that there was nothing there to salvage. He felt guilty for having had such a thought, even though it was automatic with him: just the way he was made.

He watched Snapdragons shell complete its sad roll into the centre of the pool.

Then he hurried over to the other end of the Beach and the cave to report the sad news to Ranger and the Doctor .

He stood with the rest of them later that day, as the Doctor performed the Ceremony.

And he kept going back later, staring at the shell for ages, as if willing it to sprout legs and move again. But it was just an empty shell. Hollow.

From then on, Scrounger started scouting around for monsters as a matter of routine.

Not actively, no. That wouldnt be smart. He just kept an eye out as he went about his daily business.

Instead of finding monsters, though, he just found himself counting the familiar faces as they vanished one by one, and the empty shells that collected on the sand and rocks, and the graves that followed as the Doctor did his best to heal the loss they all felt. The Ceremony was just one paragraph in what Scrounger called the Death Toll. Documentary evidence a death certificate written in the sand.

And he counted himself both lucky and unlucky that, apart from the

briefest of encounters on the night when Spook had been attacked, hed yet to see the thing responsible.

Unlucky only in the sense that if he had a better idea what the killer looked like, he might be slightly less scared. Or so he hoped.

It was a hope built of sand.

Scrounger toils away with the laser cutter and the hydraulic drill. His original shell was armed with the latter, and he found the former, along with its battery pack, in the ships surgery on one of his earliest forays. They are long overdue for a recharge, but it has been a while since he found a wreck with any juice left in its capacitors. These are his best weapons if he has to get into a scrap and the batteries are fading fast. His options are running out with them.

The metal is being just plain difficult. Or maybe its Scrounger, nervous, slipping up with the tools. The laser is deadly bright, too, and he has to work with his eyes tucked in tight, almost blind.

Meathook, by comparison, is making light work of the tube door, showing off his brute strength. Hes bending the hatch back and forth, yanking at all sorts of cruel angles, like a strong arm finishing off the work of a blunt can-opener. Scrounger decides that, yes, he is impressed; but he doesnt want to stop and think about it.

Meathook rips the door clear, and tosses it away.

The impact reverberates like a funeral bell around the drowned munitions room. The monster heaves its bulk into the tube as far as it will go. Thats when Scroungers laser conks out.

Scrounger shuts off his tiny drill, swivels his eyestalks aft and shrinks from the sight of Meathook. The creatures mouth, feelers, eyes and claw seem to fill the tube, squeezing in on him.

Scrounger backs up sideways and rams desperately into the hatch. His shell takes the knock and spreads it evenly before sending it vibrating around his insides. It hurts, but he has to shut out the ringing ache, like sealing a bulkhead door inside his brain. He forces himself back, conscious of the claw scissoring the water behind him.

Then its as if the fear is all wound up in his legs, and hes suddenly springing sideways into another hammering run. That one hurts even more.

The partial cut-out suddenly pops free, and Scrounger sails thankfully into clear water. He sinks to the sand, which billows up in a slow-motion blast cloud to embrace his fall.

Scrounger starts off in a random direction, satisfied just to be moving for now.

Then he stops dead as he breaks through the mist of mud. He cant believe his luck.

His rotten luck.

Theres a crowd waiting for him. Theyre clacking their pincers, like theyve come to watch a fight to the death. And they wont stand to be cheated.

.

Peri knew she had drowned. And now she was doing it again. Her own drop-sized ego was drowning in a self as big as an ocean.

She was also painfully aware that she was being eaten.

She wanted desperately to scream, cry, throw up breathe, even but the engulfing mass was invading every orifice, growing into her, taking over. This was a war, her body a barren No Mans Land, hollowed with dug-outs and trenches, cratered and blasted by a million gentle explosions steadily consuming all that was flesh and bone, inside and out. Violation, rape, death; it was all of the above. Like a stripping away of her humanity, in preparation for some insane godhood.

She veered like a drunken driver between barely conscious and bare consciousness, knowing that she would have to hold onto the latter, no matter what. Bare consciousness, with all its gory, morbid introspection. Self-destructive self-analysis. Dissection of her self under a microscope.

She was the microscope and she was the specimen under her own lens, so she could watch as all the germs of her life swam for cover, as all the bacterial memories raced to evade her scrutiny. But she knew she had to fix every piece of herself in her minds eye, to examine every cell in the minutest detail, no matter how much she wanted shot of them all. And how she wanted shot of them!

Especially the memories that stained, like Duncans blood on Lady

Macbeths hands.

Because not only were they ultimately more visible, wherever she chose to hide them, but they were also like thorns: all the easier to hold onto, as long as she could endure the pain.

Whatever the invading entity was, it had popped her eyeballs like bubbles, its tendrils growing in through the sockets to reach for her brain, like roots heading for the richest soil.

Blind and utterly alone, with sensory decay attacking on every front, she had only her minds eye left to use now, and even that was straining with the effort of focusing on memories shed buried in darkness.

A way out was lit up for her, swimming at her out of her new universe. It was as clear as the sign-post for the Twilight Zone, always so helpfully pointed out by Rod Serling, but less inviting.

The way out was godhood. Godhood was her only exit.

And there was no way in this life or the next that Peri wanted that. The loneliness of command was something of a cliché, sure. But how much lonelier for a god? And loneliness rippled through the soul like a slow shockwave. Too similar to the pain riddled throughout her body like woodworm through an abandoned trunk.

So she found herself turning instead to her own inner space; diving into darkness and sifting the ocean bed inside herself; scouring the wrecks.

Peri, always one letter away from peril. A cruel joke of the Doctors, and one that had stuck with her, even though hed only ever said it the once. Shed remembered the words even as shed slipped from the deck of the derelict into the ocean, weighed down with her scuba gear and the Doctors cautionary lectures about wandering too far on her own. Shed shrugged off the weight of the latter easily enough, and hadnt felt the weight of the former once she was in the water. But the latter had now returned with a vengeance.

She wanted shot of it. She found herself shedding other memories, other times; peeling them away like sunburned skin. All the hurt and the baggage that was weighing her down, keeping her pinned to the bottom. Let go of it all, she imagined, and she might just float free.

Onion memories peeled away, layer by layer. Memories streaming out

of her like tears.

Another layer peeled away:

Shes imprisoned, strapped to a couch, subjected to a searing glare of radiation. She feels the quills forming at their roots, spiking out through her skin, growing out from inside her. Like some sadistic bamboo torture shes heard about from war stories. She is turning into a bird, with all the agony of mutation and none of the promise of freedom. Slimy gargles of laughter form a chorus to her pain.

Death, she is sure, would be a release. But it is the Doctor, of course, who saves the day.

And the memories streamed out of her like tears.

Another layer peeled away:

Paternal hands lock around her throat like a vice, and shes staring up into a distorted face, a new and unfamiliar face that she knows, as much as she begs not to believe it, belongs to the Doctor. Shes choking, having the life squeezed out of her like the dregs of toothpaste from a crumpled tube. Worst of all, shes gagging, convulsively, on the unexpected memories that the act of strangulation squeezes up from the depths of her soul.

The Doctor doesnt kill her. He is a changed man and they can relax. Except Peri is a changed woman too, and has glimpsed a part of herself she had left buried forever.

And the memories streamed out of her like tears.

Another layer peeled away:

Fever sets her skin burning and crawling with sweat. Shes dying and, to make matters worse, must endure the pawing attentions of a madman. Sharaz Jek, doomed like her; desperate like her; but wearing a mask more obvious than Peri Browns. The phantom of a terrorist opera, he labours and moans at her side, sponges her fevered brow with his professions of love from which she recoils, as she recoils from any possibility that she might empathise with such a creep.

The Doctor saves the day, bears her away to the TARDIS. Where he collapses and hides himself behind another mask.

And the memories streamed out of her like tears.

Another layer peeled away: Near drowning, she splashes about in a panic, leg painfully cramped.

The water is warm but its far from inviting: it feels more like a trap. She swallows, it seems, half an ocean, fights just to float high enough to gasp and choke, maybe cry for help.

Turlough saves the day, bears her away to the TARDIS. Where she dries off and ends up in the driest, hottest place imaginable. Where she has all the mettle and spunk it takes to defy some guy who calls himself the Master. Its the beginning of a new life for Peri Brown. So of course she assumes that means that she can leave the old one behind. For good.

And the memories streamed out of her like tears.

Another layer peeled away:

Her Mom is a changed woman. She shouts a hell of a lot at Howard behind closed doors; she slams a lot of doors; and she doesnt say much to Peri. She seems to resent Peri for something shes done, and Peri has no way of knowing what it might be. Or rather, she only fears what it might be and has no way of asking.

And Howard only tells her its okay; its their secret. Until it gets to be so secret that he doesnt even acknowledge it. Doesnt acknowledge her much either, not the real Peri Brown. And he goes about like it was nothing, like he has no memory of it, no guilt, no shame. So the memory belongs only to Peri, and all the guilt, all the shame too are hers.

And the memories streamed out of her like tears.

Another layer peeled away:

Different, not-quite paternal hands touch her throat and slide to her pyjama buttons, cover her mouth to hush her. She cant cry out, scream, breathe. Her Mom is only in the next room, but she cant even make a sound loud enough to reach her. She is under some sort of spell, a deathly cold spell that brings her out in goosebumps, as this man who calls himself Howard, who calls himself stepfather invades her room like an alien. Invades her.

And nobody saves the day. She wants someone to rescue her, to carry

her away. She sometimes thinks about running herself, but she never does. Shes too scared to leave home, even though thats where the nightmares live. So she buries them deep, so deep even she might forget,

so deep it would take an archaeologist to dig them up. And the memories streamed out of her like tears.

How long had she been there? Impossible to count the days without looking outside.

And outside was what? Did she even have an outside, now that her body was nothing more than a memory? Still, the offer of godhood winked at her, like a tease of light through a barely open doorway. Deification: that was all that lay outside.

She looked away. Kept her thoughts trained inwards.

And realised that she had been tricked: as she grabbed hold of all those grains of herself, the surrounding consciousness was sifting through them.

All this stuff shed never wanted to re-examine herself, and now someone something else was prying into the self same episodes of her past. Conducting an invasive study in intimacy; sometimes a surgeon, sometimes a butcher. Exposing the flesh of her life. And tasting all the real sugar and spice that Peri Brown was made of.

She screamed a hellish scream at it. But of course she had no real voice; and, what was more, she had no ears with which to hear it. So the scream just echoed around between the pieces of her mind. She had to keep those pieces from flying further apart, but her scream had dangerously shaken the bond between them. She was in danger of losing it of losing her self. She had to hold it together.

And revenge was as keen a focus as any.

Yes, shed see how this bastard deity liked it: having her probe around inside its consciousness, weeding through its memories and sorting the wheat from the chaff. She couldnt stop it from peeling back layers of her self, spying into her private spaces. But she could sure as hell start tearing through its own inner secrets; flipping through its hidden memories like the pages of a best friends diary.

What she started then was a trade in horror. And whatever personal horrors of hers lay waiting to be unearthed, the sins of a god were far

greater. Supremely more terrifying.

So Peri shrank back again, and lay curled in gods womb. A pregnancy in reverse: flesh reduced to foetus, foetus to embryo to seed to cell. Her self fading away to something as flimsy and insubstantial as chance. Her only way out to join the surrounding consciousness, to drown herself in omnipotence.

Godhood. In touch with creation, her every emotion affecting the lives of every one of those creatures she sensed, countless as the stars. Immerse yourself in this, Peri, baptise yourself, and you will command those creatures with a thought. Imprint your personality on their everyday struggle, devise a plan, guide their lives or snuff them out as you see fit. Every one of them an individual, subject to your Will.

Every one, except for a scattered few, like sinners, who lived their own insignificant lives in blasphemous independence.

Such a vastness of life, such an abundance of nature lay waiting for her to grace it with her influence. Countless marine creatures, all waiting on her command. But she shielded her senses from them. Buried her consciousness in the sand. And fought desperately to remain invisible to the tumult who considered her their new goddess.

And either because she was too terrified to really look, or because he wasnt actually there any more, she could find no sign of the Doctor in all that mass of life.

Where could he be now? Was he alive? Was he anywhere?

She guessed she was always reaching for him, running to catch up in more senses than one. Chasing the Doctors coat tails. Wanting his recognition, his attention.

Whining like a kid when she didnt get it.

Probably she got on his nerves. Genuinely. Wherever he was now, he was probably back on his travels, happy to be rid of her. Or at least, if not happy, at least with the sense of himself and the TARDIS having shed some weight.

But deep down ha, more laughs she knew who she would be reaching for again. The Doctor was the only one worth reaching for when things were this bad.

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Scrounger cant believe it: Meathook has followers. Disciples. Groupies.

An army. What is this monsters game? Why pick on Scrounger? Maybe Scrounger is being paranoid again.

But right now, Scrounger needs to be much more than just paranoid.

Meathook erupts from the munitions tube and plunges toward the ocean bed like a slow meteor. Some of his spikes are bent inwards and a few attachments have ripped or snapped from his shell to drift down around him. When he lands, the main impact crater and its cloud are huge.

Scrounger thinks, then decides to do nothing of the sort.

Instead, he charges into action.

Meathooks getting angry, hes thrashing and snapping around, hunting out a target in the solid fog hes made himself. Stirring up the murk.

Scrounger scoots bravely in under the champing pincers. This close hes not invisible though. Meathook chops out once, twice. He snaps a straggling leg, and Scrounger squeals inwardly with the pain. Then the big strike, the dangerous one, chews off half his lighting array.

But Scrounger continues his run. A mad, long dash back to the Beach. And Ranger.

Scrounger remembers the monster from the attack on Ranger. Right after the business with the corral, Scrounger had decided to watch and wait for it to return. He was just playing sentinel. The Doctor, he was sure, would be able to slay the monster.

However big this beast was, the Doctor would tower over it. The Doctor, after all, was a man.

And so much more of a man than Ranger.

Scrounger has a great deal of respect, admiration and other feelings for Ranger, but compared with the Doctor, Ranger is a mere shadow. Sure, the Doctor can be remote and aloof, solitary, whereas Ranger has openly befriended Scrounger and the others. But some days Ranger is an empty thing, like Snapdragons shell; while the Doctor, from the day Scrounger brought him ashore, has always seemed to

contain more than even his ample frame should permit.

That night, as Scrounger peeped over the hump of rocks at one end of the Beach, firelight was licking the lips of Rangers cave, playing over the patchwork mound of colours that Scrounger recognised as the Doctors coat. The sand was engraved everywhere with scuttle-marks, and Scrounger crossed the expanse swiftly, eyestalks standing to attention all the way. He saw nothing but moonlight and shadow; heard nothing but the impatient hushing of the waves.

Across the gargling river, at the mouth of the cave, Scrounger hesitated.

The Doctor was asleep, using his coat as a blanket. Ranger slept too, curled up close to the cave entrance for a change, mentally wrestling with a nightmare. Scrounger knew this, the same way hed always known about Ranger since Ranger had made him a blood brother. Scrounger snapped a claw at the nightmare; a hollow reflex.

But then, the nightmare moved. Legs scratched over the rocky floor, just inside the darkened cave mouth. Ranger, nervous at any time of day, jumped awake, a chain of half-formed expletives shooting from his mouth: Wha ? Fu ! Jeez! Scrounger charged in; another reflex. The Doctor was awake and standing in the same instant.

Shit! Ranger was up, dancing madly around his fire, beating at what was now a very real and fearsome attacker.

It was the monster, had to be. Massive, four times the size of Rangers head, thrashing like a feeding shark. The larger of its two claws scissored into Rangers arm and held tight; the other snipped at his face every chance it got. Scrounger froze, and watched.

Finally Ranger stumbled through the guttering fire, kicking it almost out. He slammed his arm into the wall and screamed out in pain as the action dislodged the monster and sent it clattering away. Then the monster was on the run. Charging sidelong at Scrounger.

Scrounger ducked and reeled in his eyes. Made himself part of the Beach.

The monster scampered over him. Trailing a bloody strip of meat, it left Scrounger with a portrait sketched in glimpses: giant, with a bucket shell, bolts and metal shards wedged in and held fast by a thick crust of barnacles. Spikes and armour plates welded all over. Like a steel anemone. A real Frankenstein job. Vanished now in the night and

splashing furiously through the small river to the sea.

The Doctor watched it go, his deepening gaze following it all the way out into the sea and the night, as if he might discern some vital clue from the darkness it left behind.

Ranger stamped around and swore a lot, clutching his arm. His pain filled the cave.

Pain that Scrounger could feel.

Jeez-us! Bastard spiked me with a goddamn meathook!

So Ranger had given their monster a name. Along with a chunk of his flesh.

The Doctor can fix his leg, Scrounger hopes, and his lighting array can be easily mended. He hobbles as fast as he can out of the billowing cloud that looks all set to roll after him. Perhaps it will cover his getaway.

Scrounger prays.

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Why dyou come here?

The Doctor pouted expansively and regarded Ranger for a moment before deciding to try to draw him out some more. You mean the Beach? I was brought here by your friends.

He concentrated hard on the simple act of holding a plank in place while Crane and Toolbox set about it with their rivet guns. The thunk-thunk of the rivets hammering home had Ranger flinching each time, and the Doctor eyed him with sidelong glance, worried that the man might go running back to his cave.

It was something of a gamble, dropping such an obvious obstacle in the way of the mans first attempt in days to make any kind of conversation. The human mind is filled with curiosity. An insatiable curiosity. Knowing that, the Doctor had pressed on with his own agenda and, he fancied, had drawn Ranger out of his shell by degrees by the simple measure of ignoring him. Now, with the boats construction well under way, it was clear from Rangers eyes that his interest was starting to outweigh his timidity.

You know what I mean, Ranger insisted tightly, teeth seeming to chew at his own frustrated nerves. Here.

Ah, said the Doctor, under raised brows. He waved off his labour force and inspected their craftsmanship. An experimental tug and press here and there proved the board was perfectly secure; but there were gaps that were going to need some form of sealant. That meant more foraging expeditions, of course; but he had anticipated a good many more of those. It might be nice, he reflected, if he could persuade Ranger to accompany them once or twice. The fellow had recovered to some degree and the walks might do him good; added to which, he probably knew the island well, and some gentle interrogation might entice a few more scraps of information out of him.

It wasnt only the human mind that suffered from an insatiable curiosity.

You mean this world, he said to Ranger, softening his expression carefully. Well, to be honest, my friend and I came here by accident. That sort of thing happens to me a lot. But after we set down on that derelict, I rather fancied a spot of recreational fishing, and my friend was set on enjoying some of diving. Every time he thought of Peri, his gaze drifted involuntarily out to sea. Life can be that cruel sometimes. We have in mind the simplest of endeavours and pastimes, and it deals us the harshest of blows.

We do it to ourselves.

The Doctor looked back at Ranger, who sat hunched and twitching almost imperceptibly over on the other side of the boat. Crane and Toolbox snapped claws at each other, play-fighting while they waited for further instruction. I think we can take a break for a moment, the Doctor permitted them graciously. Weve all earned one, and we need to go collecting materials again. The two crabs scuttled off, still duelling on the run as they made for the rocks. The Doctor watched them go and settled back to sit on the sand.

Yes, he said at length, we do sometimes. But its just as vital that we recognise when were not responsible, when were not to blame. He let the mild breeze carry the significance of his words. You were a soldier. Whatever it is you feel youve done, you must have been following the orders of others. It doesnt absolve you of your responsibility, no, I wont pretend that; but its important you take no more than your fair share.

Blame is pointless, spat Ranger, a fraction of a laugh breaking through the bitterness. Then he looked hard at the Doctor. But theres a point to what youre doing. There always seems to be a point to everything you do.

Yes, the Doctor tried to expel some of his sadness discreetly under a sigh, there is a point to most things from one perspective or another. The point here being, he went on with renewed resolve and a pat on the crude hull beside him, to get me out on those waves and searching for my ship. You see, you were right, Ranger, this is no place for clowns.

Rangers grin was sweet and sour. Getting you off the Beach?

Off this world. The Doctors voice was distant, as though part of him had already left.

Off the world, off the Beach. Same thing.

Yes, I suppose it is, from your point of view. The Doctor returned his thoughts to the Beach and smiled kindly at Ranger. At least Ill be out of your hair. Once Ive made sure youre all right, of course. Properly on the mend.

Ranger shivered suddenly and his eyes turned to stone, even though he tried hard to match the Doctors smile. Im fit enough to help out. What sort of gear do you need?

The Doctor sat cross-legged on the Beach, scratching buoyancy calculations on a flat slab of rock with an oversized nib of a pebble, and adding a diagram or two of the kind of rig he would need to support the TARDIS. The combat-webbing they had found was very fine and, even layered as the Doctor planned, might well rip with the stresses involved. Ideally he should reinforce it with some more stalwart lengths of honestto-goodness rope. It was a requirement he was endeavouring to convey to a small assembly of crabs who had flocked with eager curiosity around his scribblings.

Crane barged his way in, shoving poor little Scuttlebutt aside, to snatch the Doctors stone in his fighting claw. Swift scuttling and deft gestures with the stone marked out the Doctors answer for him in crude pictograms. A couple of parallel furrows, slashed across with diagonals, were plainly rope; a trio of ships, each broken in half, under wavy lines were clearly a field of wrecks. That was where they would find the Doctor his rope; sufficient lengths of durable rescue line, he supposed hopefully.

Excellent! Yes, we should be able to send down for some on the way. If its anywhere near our route. The Doctor clapped his hands together appreciatively, brushing sand from his palms with immense satisfaction, as Crane and some of the others tilted themselves forwards; a gesture he had come to recognise as an acknowledgement. Well, I must say, its a shame that Ranger doesnt feel up to mediating between us, but we get by well enough without him, dont we?

Most of the clustered crabs stared back at him with something akin to dismayed surprise.

I was speaking … out of turn, he apologised, acutely aware not only from the expressions in their eyes, but also from the evidence continually apparent in the actions and behaviour of this remarkable community that these creatures, especially the more mature ones, were capable of deep feelings. Ranger had contributed immensely on their expeditions and even a little on the construction work, although mostly in a supervisory role in the days since their chat, and the Doctor had now had ample opportunity to observe the crabs and him together. He realised it was quite possible probable, in fact that these creatures cared about Ranger in the same way that they clearly cared about their fellows as they gathered around each fresh graveside.

Thats the trouble with figures of speech. Sometimes they add up to entirely the wrong meaning.

The group seemed to want something more. More reassurance.

The Beach needs Ranger, he said. But dont worry, well get him fixed up as soon as Scrounger comes back with those medical supplies. Hell be right as rain and

But hed lost their attention in an instant. Agitation stirred among them, and the few smaller creatures that had been flanking Thinktank scurried off across the sand, back towards Rangers end of the Beach.

It was in the opposite direction that the Doctor found the cause for their panic.

A woman had come like Eve into this poor mans Eden. A human woman. Or at least, something very like one.

She was naked, except for a very thrown-together ensemble of seaweed strands and the shreds of some uniform. Bald too, except for a few young shoots of hair showing through the scalp. An earnest intensity illuminated her eyes, all the more marked because her

features were so lacking in individuality.

She was clinging to the rocks, as though having clambered her way around the cliff face from a neighbouring cove. Her blanched skin had collected some colour: scrapes and bruises suffered en route. She didnt so much as wince, though, as she dropped from the rock-face to the sand, where she landed clumsily on her knees.

Gaze glued to the Doctor, she thrust herself to her feet. Stood proud. Then she walked straight towards him.

Even the bulkier crabs like Thinktank and Crane backed off, ducking around the Doctors legs for cover. The Doctor spared them a glance. Of course! For cover!

No! Go back! Get back! He started forward toward the woman, waving his arms in front of himself like a couple of windscreen wipers. He pointed at the stretch of beach between himself and her. Mines! Youre walking into a minefield! Go back! Ill find a way to get to you!

She halted, scant moments before he finished shouting. She was suddenly on edge, her staring eyes for the first time shooting past the Doctor. He glanced over his shoulder, where he could make out only a faintly darker shadow inside the cave mouth.

Wait! Its all right! He cupped his hands into the shape a loud-hailer to call after her as she raced back for the rocks. He waved his arms about to no avail. In short time, she was leaping up to commence a clambering retreat, back around the cliffs to wherever shed come from. With the minefield to traverse, it was far too late to go chasing after her.

Ranger, without doing much of anything, had scared her off.

This Eve was persistent, the Doctor had to give her that. She was back later that afternoon, stalking through the shallows, hunched low, making her way along to Rangers end of the Beach and the corral.

She was avoiding the mines, yes, but there was another potentially lethal danger facing her on her current approach as the Doctor suddenly realised the instant before the shots cracked out and chopped through the water around her knees. She stood seemingly paralysed, while Ranger yelled from the cave mouth: Get your scrawny stealing ass away from my farm! Fish your own, bitch!

The Doctor turned and looked back. Ranger had bolted out of the cave, and his stance betrayed an awkward skid; hed fired a snapshot burst, from the hip, thankfully wide of the mark. He raised the rifle and squeezed off another couple of bursts. The Doctor heard the rounds whistle past like razors through the air.

Bitch vulture! Scram! Go on! Get back on your own beach!

More bullets splashed through the smooth waves like skimming stones. Wide of the mark again. But close enough to send the woman diving aside.

She splashed down, but picked herself up hurriedly, scrappily and propelled herself away in a frantic dash, slowed to astronaut pace by the depth of the water. Ranger threw a hail of profanities after her. The Doctor looked back again to see that the man had his rifle braced properly against his shoulder, and was sighting carefully along the barrel.

No! The Doctor launched the protest just ahead of himself as he flapped his arms wide and homed in on Ranger like a poorly guided and rather psychedelic missile; steering wide to obscure his shifting line of sight, then powering into him for a diving tackle.

Ranger toppled onto his back and the Doctor pitched over on top of him, pinning him to the sand with the gun across his chest. The Doctor could see a second skin of sweat standing proud on Rangers forehead. At first he assumed this was attributable to the mans wounded arm, giving him pain. But then he saw that something akin to a phobia had seized hold of Ranger.

Eyes bulging and teeth bared, Ranger stared up at the Doctor as though he was poison.

Get off! Get off me! He fought his way out from under the Doctor, kicking him off and then thrashing about in the sand: a crude, frenzied sort of decontamination. Get off me!

Im off! Its all right! Im off! The Doctor pulled himself back into a kneeling position, hands raised and open as a clear mean-you-no-harm signal. Whatever had taken hold of Ranger, he hoped at least that the woman was by now well clear of the Beach, headed safely back to wherever shed come from. This episode could not end here, though, and for the time being the Doctor felt obliged to keep his gaze on Ranger.

Please, Ranger, he said, lending plenty of weight to his voice, we have to talk.

Tell me what it is, tell me whats bothering you about that woman!

Get off! Out! Stay out! Stay away!

Ranger grabbed his rifle, tucked it under his good arm, then dragged himself backwards and flipped himself over to crawl hastily back inside the cave entrance.

There, just out of daylights reach, he propped the gun beside him and curled himself into a ball, scowling fiercely at the day outside that had so offended him.

The Doctors shoulders sagged. Ranger was always so effective at shutting everybody out, he might as well have sealed off his cave with a portcullis.

Whatever the mystery behind this Eve, Adam was having none of it.

The Doctor stood a safe distance back from the cave mouth. Deep within it he could just make out Rangers eyes, fixed like bayonets and aimed straight out at him.

Im not a soldier any more! he barked out hoarsely. Im not any part of that!

The Doctor crouched down, letting his voice blow gently into the cave. Ranger, we have to talk to her. I have to talk to her. Shes the only other human being Ive seen here. She may well know something, something that can help me help you!

She wants the fish! The boat! Your boat!

I dont know what she wants, but its worth finding out. Think, man! The Doctor put some gravel into his voice and threw it harder into the cave. Dont let your suspicions get in the way! She could be a good support for you, if youd only share the Beach!

It was difficult to make out in the darkness, but it looked as if the shadows were moving: as if Ranger was tightening the curl of his body and clutching at his head.

I dont care! the man yelled. Do what you please! I dont want anything to do with it! I dont want any part of it!

The Doctor shook his head and stood. He listened to Ranger screaming the same words over and over, until they sounded sore in his throat. Then he turned and set off across the Beach, leaving Ranger well and truly alone.

Traversing the sand, he spotted Thinktank mulling over the rock pool in which they had found Snapdragons shell. For all the Doctor knew, the creature could have been studying his own reflection. Thinktank, definitely more of a thinker than a doer. Not a crab of action, the Doctor laughed silently to himself. Not much of a conversationalist either. But perhaps enough to take the edge off Rangers loneliness.

Thinktank, old chap, the Doctor suggested, Im taking the others for an exploratory jaunt. Youre free to come with us, of course, but Id rather you stayed here to keep Ranger company, if its all the same to you. What do you say?

By way of answer, Thinktank, after a considered pause, scuttled off toward Rangers cave.

The Doctor tried to look on his escort as an intrepid team of marine commandos, albeit in miniature, as opposed to a sorry band of refugees which was what they were in danger of becoming.

He studied them with due respect as he paused for a breather on the brow of a small hill to scan the terrain ahead. It was the gravest of shames: to have survived a war, only to see your community fall to pieces in the aftermath. These creatures deserved better. They deserved the Doctors help; and maybe there was more help to be had from this woman, assuming he could broker a peace between her and Ranger.

Still, at the back of his mind well, not quite the back, it had to be said hovered the thought that what he was actually seeking from her was some help, or answers, for himself. He tried to set that sense of selfishness aside. The quest, after all, was the thing, and the quest would turn up whatever it would. The Doctor exercised no control over that. Whatever this woman had to offer, he had no way of telling who might benefit most or indeed, if anyone might benefit.

It wasnt as though she looked capable of rendering a great deal of assistance. Even so, where Ranger was concerned, surely there was safety in numbers.

Admittedly, it was fair to observe, that hadnt been much of a defence for the crabs.

They had been reduced to a paltry half-dozen in the short time since Meathook had arrived on the scene and that had been not long after the Doctor himself had turned up.

All the same, the Doctor was convinced that Ranger and the Beach community in general would be better off with the woman than without. If there were only two human beings on this island, then he was determined that they were going to get along.

She cant be very far away, he reasoned aloud, making a mental note of the suns steady slide down the sky. The islands long but not especially wide. If shes camped anywhere in this direction, it shouldnt be too long before we come across some clues.

Without need for further hints, the members of his posse spread themselves out to search on either side as the Doctor strode on ahead, knee-deep in foliage. The only company he was left with, as they disappeared under the surrounding greenery, was their noise: the chop and crash of the larger crabs as they pushed and scythed their way through, and the scuttling rustle of their tinier brethren.

Instinct was what drove the Doctor; he knew that he ought to find this woman. What drove the crabs, he couldnt rightly say. But it was evident that they had come to have an attachment to and even a degree of dependence on him.

In turn, he realised full well that he had inherited a degree of responsibility for them.

Scuttlebutt, Dungbeetle, Dozer, Crane and Bucket (now sadly bereft of his nominal counterpart), all faithfully accompanying him on his trek. Regardless of whether they were commandos or refugees, they all qualified as companions.

Dusk wasnt a leisurely affair on this world, and night would soon be on its way.

They pressed on initially over ground that theyd already covered on earlier foraging expeditions. Greenery was plentiful, but had given way to bare earth where the conflict had touched this island: blasted clean by naval bombardment or stripped clear for some military construction. This, the Doctor supposed, would be fairly typical of other dispersed landmasses over the globe assuming there were any.

Fortunately, nature here had already begun to reclaim her territory, repopulating the slopes with her indigenous varieties of fruit-bearing

trees and densely clumped undergrowth, all of it duelling for available space with swordlike leaves and fronds. These hills would perhaps when nature had finished her nursing be the only things on this island to bear no scars from the war.

Even nature, though, could do only so much to patch up the wounds left by the earthworks around the bunker complex that had evidently served as a minor supply dump here. Her efforts at regrowth here had proved cosmetic at best.

It was around this dump the source of most of the useful materials they had appropriated on those earlier expeditions that they found a number of fairly fresh human footprints, left by someone with small, bare soles. Evidently the woman had ventured at least this far from wherever she had based herself. Probably she had come here with much the same mission in mind: the gathering of useful materials.

Scuttlebutt started digging furiously around in the disturbed earth at the bunker entrance.

I shouldnt worry about that, advised the Doctor sternly, impatient to keep going.

We dont really have time for any more foraging.

But Scuttlebutts only response was to gesture urgently with both pincers at the spot where he had been digging. It was then the Doctor remembered that this was where they had buried the other rifle and that, as Scuttlebutt had already realised, it was now gone.

They had been lucky enough to come across the weapon on their last visit here; and luckier still that Ranger had been busy searching another part of the bunker at the time, and so had been unable to add it to the one he already owned. The Doctor had insisted that the crabs bury their find out of sight. I dont think this world has any more use for such things, thank you very much, he had declared on that occasion.

Well, possibly not, but the woman apparently begged to differ. She had obviously found the cache and armed herself.

The question is, he mulled quietly now, does that suggest belligerence on her part, or merely the will to defend herself against Rangers more violent tendencies?

Of course the crabs could offer no answer as they gathered around him in the rapidly failing light.

A curious chittering attracted all their eyes standing tall on stalks or otherwise toward the edge of the clearing. There, a group of primates grey-haired, lemur-tailed and bush-baby-eyed had gathered to watch all the activity around the bunker.

There was a sudden commotion as Crane lunged into a charge toward them, working his claw like shears in the hands of a psychotic.

The primates shrieked and pranced about in a panic, unsure what to do. Then Cranes advance unexpectedly slowed; little Dungbeetle, with his oversized claw, had heroically nabbed one of the bigger crabs legs, digging his own into the earth and thereby adding a surprising amount of drag to impede Cranes sideways sprint.

Cranes eyestalks jerked this way and that, frustrated, as he watched the primates scatter. There was real fury in the way he rounded on Dungbeetle and clipped the air hard enough to make the animals defender faintly dizzy. Under water, such a castanet clack from that mighty claw might well have stunned or even killed a creature as tiny as Dungbeetle.

Cranes lifting gear whirred into action, and the hook dipped down to latch onto Dungbeetle. Clearly the larger crab was hoping to dangle the smaller one from the end of his line and snap at him to his hearts content.

The Doctor planted a foot firmly down between the two of them, forcing Crane to retreat a little. Now, now, none of that bickering. And you, Crane, ought to learn to manage that aggressive streak of yours. Not to mention to pick on someone your own size! What have you got against those primates, hmm? What harm can they possibly have done you? You ought to take a leaf out of young Dungbeetles book here. Try exercising a little restraint.

Stooping, he gently arrested Dungbeetles spin and held him still while the little chap orientated himself. There we are. Now, well have no more of that sort of thing.

Crane reeled in his cable in sullen silence.

The Doctor scanned the area briefly for the primates, but they had all done the sensible thing and vanished completely in the gathering dusk; mostly, he suspected, up into the higher branches of the trees,

where they remained hidden. Despite being obviously unsuited to climbing, Crane must have looked a fearsome sight even from up there. Especially to such timid eyes.

This observation gave the Doctor moderate pause for thought. While it was not unknown for the crabs to scavenge the islands interior, usually they restricted their hunting to the rock pools close to the shoreline. You know, I cant help thinking that with such a distinct lack of any obvious predators, the proliferation of such a timid species should be significantly higher. Theres plenty of vegetation to support much larger colonies. Of course, he reflected, the war might have accounted for a good many of these innocent little animals, and perhaps the islands population was only just beginning to recover. Not a situation that he could remedy. Still, nature will find her own way. Shes proven herself more than capable on worlds worse afflicted than this one.

Thrusting his hands in his pockets and puffing himself up with the self-important air of a general leading his troops, he set off again into the undergrowth. Nothing more to be gained here. Onward! The Doctor led his party over a narrow ravine and on into a stand of taller grasses. Once they had beaten a path through this, they were able to make out, not far ahead of them, an exposed slope of cliff-top on which stood just a few bare trees, huddled together in dispersed groups as if for protection against the gathering night. It was difficult in the dark to discern any signs of an encampment, but there was certainly movement to be seen up there and plenty of noise to accompany it, around the base of one of the clumps of trees. More chittering primates were scratching excitedly around what looked like the remains of a camp fire.

Crane set off immediately, claws snipping the air aggressively, but the Doctor was quick enough to catch up with him and give him a hard rap on his shell, bringing him to a reluctant halt. The Doctor touched a finger to his lips and tutted disapprovingly at the frustrated creature.

Bucket moved up more stealthily, creeping low along the ground, and scooped up Scuttlebutt to drop him into the bucket on his back. Hoisting the bucket aloft like a cherry picker, he shone his infra-red lamps onto the cliff-top ahead. Scuttlebutt poked his eyestalks up to peek over the rim, then clicked a pincer as a signal to Bucket. Reconnaissance completed, the larger crab backed up to nudge the Doctors shoe.

Apparently it was all clear.

The Doctor marched up the slope and into the open, gazing about him all the while.

The crabs hurried to join him, scaring off the primates, who fled squealing up the trees and away into the grasses.

Where can she be? Too late for wandering about near this cliff-top, I should imagine.

Between them, in the lights from Buckets array, they examined what little there was of the encampment: an extinguished fire; a few fish bones and fruit peelings scattered around; and a raft, tethered with strands of the buoyant seaweed, erected as a lean-to against the trees to afford a minimum of shelter. There was very little else to be seen; and certainly no sign of the missing rifle.

This was primitive enough, the Doctor supposed, that even Rangers modest set-up on the Beach might seem enviable by comparison.

Tracks led over to the cliff-edge, ending at the top of a cleft of shingle that ran down to the shore and a deep, pocket-sized cove. The Doctor stood and looked out to sea. Night sky and ocean were merging in the distance. There was a lot of nothing out there. And not much of anything on the island either.

There was only one place that the woman could be headed.

The Doctor and his band had made it only part of the way back to the Beach when they heard the gunfire.

The war may have been over, but clearly there were battles still to be fought.

The Doctor raced ahead, while his companions hastened to catch up as best they could.

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Scrounger cant remember exactly when Ranger arrived on the Beach. The days tend to blur together in his mind. But he can remember exactly how it happened.

The thought of running from the newcomer, as he shuffled down from

the cliffs toward the shore, never occurred to Scrounger, nor to any of the others, not even timid little Snapdragon.

Of course, none of them had their names until Ranger came.

Ranger was done fighting. It was evident in his hunched walk and in his tired eyes.

In his warm grin, too, even though it sometimes flashed across his face like a nervous thing. Ranger was just a new creature on the Beach that day; a tall creature whod crawled out of the cave late like he was afraid of the daylight. He was all beat up like the older warriors that Scrounger generally avoided in his forays out across the seabed.

And the mans armour, the colour of mud and weeds, was hanging off him in tatters.

Scrounger and Snapdragon stood their ground, forward of the others, following the strangers slow shuffle to the sea. They eyed each other curiously as he stood there in the wind, salt water washing his boots.

When he turned and saw them he laughed. Walkin toolkits, look at you! Shit, you little guys are smart. Snapdragons miniature shell, like a compressed egg of plastic, caught the mans eye first. Youre lookin a little dented though. Like you been through the wars.

Ranger crouched down over them, shivering as if against a bitter cold even though the incoming breeze was light. He stuck his finger out to tease Snapdragon, only to think better of it when Snapdragons sharp, if tiny, pincers nipped the air. But he held that grin. He stuffed one of his shaking hands inside his pack; not, as it first appeared, to steady it, but to retrieve a curio from within. The object, Ranger demonstrated, bristled with blades, cork-screws and, well, gadgets. He waved it at Scrounger. Youre just like one of these bad boys, aint you?

Scrounger grew excited. Was this to be a gift from the newcomer? He was aware of Rangers eyes scrutinising him properly for the first time.

He would always remember liking those round fish-eyes, gleaming in that sun-cooked oval face.

Thats some shell you got there, added Ranger. He glanced around the others, assembled behind Scrounger and Snapdragon. Smart little guys, yeah!

Ranger pocketed the multi-bladed knife, and Scrounger realised that it

wasnt a present for him after all.

Names Ranger. He extended that finger again. Pleasures mine.

Later, lazily, Ranger lobbed something like a stone into the sea. It exploded like a mine, and he waded out to collect the few dead fish that floated in on the waves.

Scrounger wondered if he should help gather them in. Favour for favour; you had to earn a friend. That was the way life worked, wasnt it? By the time hed made up his mind, though, Ranger was all done.

Scrounger felt an inexplicable twinge at having let the opportunity slide.

As the sun dropped, Ranger lit a fire and cooked the fish, fed his new crew thats what he called them with what he didnt eat. And he must not eat a lot, Scrounger thought, given the mans size. Some of the others gathered around too, wary of the fire but not now of Ranger. There was plenty for everyone, a regular feast.

Ranger, sometimes jittery and talking too fast, filled the night with the sound of his own voice, telling what sounded like only the beginnings of stories. And pinning names on Scrounger and Snapdragon and the whole gathering. Names they could wear like medals.

Scrounger stayed close to Ranger. He fancied a closer look at that knife with its nest of tools. More than that, he wanted a new friend.

Scrounger tumbles in the moonlit foam where the waves meet the shore. Hes sure he grew too heavy for that accumulated too many accessories a while ago. Normally he has to race the waves to avoid sinking in the wet sand. But now, with his limp, the sea can shove him around.

Still, hes on the Beach. Even if Meathook is due to arrive some time within the next few waves.

Levering up on his claw, Scrounger launches himself into a tottering run, aims himself for the cave. Dumb bad luck has landed him on the wrong side of the stream.

Now he has to ford it at its narrowest point, struggling over the pebbles. Slipping and sliding, he gets knocked about some more. The pebbles seem to chuckle at his clumsy efforts. At least hes had enough sense, he tells them, to come up close to where the streams current

mingles with the in-wash of waves. Hes not that panicked.

Still, hell be in a rare state by the time he reaches Ranger.

Ranger. Where is he? Wheres the Doctor? Please dont be away.

A fire casts its fluttering glow from the cave. Somebodys home.

Its not the Doctor. And its not Ranger either; Scrounger cant feel him anywhere.

Not even in the land of nightmares. Rangers not asleep, no. Rangers not here.

Scrounger hauls himself weakly, nervously, into the cave entrance. He peers into the flame and darkness, from where something that is neither pounces. Haaaaaa! A savage cry, a human cry. A killers cry. And with it comes a rifle-butt, smashing down on Scroungers shell and clubbing him flat on the bed of rock.

Shock spears through him like a hammered nail. Stunned, he scrabbles around, claws snapping and biting at only air.

Narrow eyes alight, the woman brings the rifle swinging down again.

Scrounger scurries up the wall until he tips over, rolls back onto his legs. He staggers. But he manages a dodge back between the womans legs and breaks for the mouth of the cave. The woman, ranting, thrills to the chase, celebrating an easy catch. Prematurely, Scrounger reassures himself. Its another prayer.

Skittering recklessly into the river, he loses his balance, his bad leg hooked under a boulder. The water bubbles over him, working him loose but nowhere near fast enough. His eyestalks crane up, straining for a view above the feathering water.

Vibrations footsteps drum out a warning through the sand, and then theyre splashing into the stream. Shes close. Shes very close.

Where the hell is Ranger?

Scrounger reaches down with a claw to scissor through his trapped leg. He figures he can afford to lose one more.

Wait. The woman has frozen. Shes towering over him, but her appetite for murder has turned to confusion, laced with a growing fear.

Scrounger follows her gaze to the shoreline. There, the breaking foam has become a tide of shells and pincers. An image floats up from history: Meathook leads the D-Day landings.

Where is Ranger? Whether hes on the Beach or away hunting, Scrounger should still feel him. Theyre blood brothers, for heavens sake.

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Context. That was the key. A sense of your own identity; your purpose in life; your place in the scheme of things; and other such stuff of profound import in whatever passed, in this universe, for a normal life. To get any real sense of context, Peri would have to take a look outside her nightmare. And to do that, she would need to use eyes other than her own, now long lost.

The eyes she found, or so she fathomed after a few experimental shifts of perspective, were those of marine creatures, darting over and through a root structure that extended for miles across the ocean bed. A sickly grey-pink in colour, the structure resembled a jumbled, tangled pile of giants bones thickly lagged with pocked and pitted flesh. At the outer edges, the roots plunged like gnarled, gristly fingers down into the world. For all Peri knew, they dug deep into the core, or reached further around the crust to envelop it in their deathly grip. Watery shadows obscured their true extent.

Peri jumped to another point of view: that of a crab, nestling deep under the forest of roots. Occasionally the crab would search above, and she would see anemones anchored to the pocked and pitted joints, and weeds, bleached and sapped of colour, caught in swaying masses around some of the junctions of limbs. Ghostly foliage.

The tangle of limbs converged ultimately into a swollen mass of air-filled corridors, rooms, ducts and other systems that must have measured kilometres across. It was a sponge-form, then, with roots that had come to resemble a dense mess of grey-pink spaghetti, crushed into cerebral-like convolutions, as they fought with one another to reach their own centre. Close in, the surface retained a gnarled and crusted, coral-like texture, but with the feel of soft flesh.

The marine creatures were grazing on that flesh, leaving ragged wounds where it all trailed in tatters, like flaps of dead skin. Peri experienced it through their mouths just before she recoiled from the wrench of nausea tightening the stomach she no longer had.

A mess of thoughts floated up like trash jettisoned from a submarine. They were all little more than sick jokes, unbidden but prompted by the nausea. The feeding of the five thousand; the Church, the opiate of the masses; the food chain, and Peris role in it. All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. They feasted on their god, and their god fed on Peri.

Talk about your place in the scheme of things.

She could send out feeler-like thoughts to tap into the senses sight mostly, and taste and touch to some degree of all those creatures. They were all open windows to her. But that was as far as her powers went. She couldnt command them. No, for that, she would need to embrace her destiny, her appointment with godhood.

Well, thanks, but Ill pass on the coronation. She reinforced the bars around her own prison, bricking up the spaces with all those hard memories of her past. The bricks and mortar of her self, solid, concentrated; she had to keep that intact at all costs.

Huff and puff all you like, youre not blowing this house down. It occurred to Peri that she didnt have a chinny-chin-chin by which to swear, but she wasnt going to let that weaken her determination.

Whatever doesnt kill you, makes you stronger, right? This thing, this god, should have killed her. It might have been preferable, in fact. But no, she couldnt afford thoughts like that. Thoughts like that would make her cave.

Cave. She glimpsed a cave, somewhere, far off. It was like spying land on the horizon after an eternity adrift at sea.

And maybe she saw the Doctor too, beating his coat furiously against a rock.

Stupid. She was losing her marbles, along with everything else.

The ripples of silent laughter were back, coursing through her like a river through a landscape, bringing with them the inevitable floods of tears. Tears of thought.

Doctor! Her cry echoed through her mind and out through the ocean. But the ocean was too vast and the cry dissipated all too soon. She couldnt reach him. Could never reach him, wherever he was; could never catch up with him now.

So all that was left, she realised slowly through the pain, was to do what he would do. Explore some more, know her situation, establish her context and find her way out. That, or a resolution. Even if that meant having to face the horrors again.

The sins of a god. They had almost shattered her the last time.

Context, she supposed, was also key to unlocking those dread memories. She was locked inside with them, sharing a Pandoras Box; but if she could only look at the horrors in a different light, she figured, maybe she could spare some measure of her sanity, spare herself the bluntest end of the trauma. Like staring at the Gorgons reflection in a shield, and saving her heart from turning to cracked stone.

So maybe she could read a horror story from this Memorys past and, instead of reliving it, simply it) experiencing it in fullest Technicolor, simply retell it as a joke.

A sick joke.

Did you hear the one about… the Intelligence Officer and the three POWs? How did that one go? Oh yes, that was it.

There are these three POWs two men and a woman kept starved and wasted in a cell, the walls of which extrude whip-like tendrils that invade their bodies, coil around their spinal columns and dip into their digestive tracts to skim off pretty much all the nutrients from any meals that their captors care to give them.

Anyway, in walks this Intelligence Officer smart, handsome, with a confident swagger. He looks over these three pathetic scraps of humanity and says: Okay, Im here to present you with your options.

Theyre pretty limited, to be honest. Youre all three privileged to be taking part in an experimental programme that will effectively mean you switching sides in this conflict as of now.

None of the POWs takes this news very well. Two of them stay silent, while the bigger of the men spits and swears and kicks his legs furiously, managing only to expend a lot of energy achieving nothing.

Hey, thems the breaks, says the Intelligence Officer, his stance a shrug. I just get handed the orders from on high. Nothing to do with me. If its any consolation

which I doubt it will be therell be a way out in place for those of you whose performance meets expectations. That is, he emphasises, those of you who do a good enough job.

The Intelligence Officer paces the flesh-like floor for a bit, flaunting his ability to walk about while the captives are securely lashed to the walls by the spongy growths inside them. That, and allowing his words to sink in. One of the POWs quakes and trembles and seems to be looking for some special word for him; the angrier man just swears some more. Finally, when nothing more is forthcoming, the nervous fellow asks: But what about me?

The Intelligence Officer tries to appear apologetic. I got the same orders regarding all of you, he says. Were nothing if not fair.

But I I protests the man, a sidelong glance at his fellow prisoners.

Yeah, yeah, I know you spilled all sorts of tactical details and fleet dispositions, defences and shit, and maybe thatll earn you some Brownie points, give you a head start in the service of our programme. He makes a special effort to sound encouraging. But basically youve all been selected for the same deal.

Now the other POWs are glaring hard at their fellow prisoner, full of disgust and contempt, of course, and the angry guy spits and swears at him instead.

Anyway, shut up a minute, the Intelligence Officer butts in. Youll want to hear me out. Youll need to be working on the same team, getting on with each other out there, and knowing what this is all about. Now, Ive only been clued in on the theory side, but I figure its going to be pretty traumatic for you. So Im here to prep you, brief you a little on what to expect. Sort of soften the blow, take the sting out of it, okay?

The three POWs fall utterly silent.

Okay, good. Got your attention. Listen up then. This is how its going to break down

He goes on to explain precisely what it is theyve been selected for. As he does so, the wall extends more sponge-like growths into the POWs and, as though granted permission, commences consuming them from the inside out, absorbing their bodies into its own mass.

And the Intelligence Officer watches the expressions on their faces.

A very sick joke indeed.

But the punchline is the killer…

Peri did her best not to think about the punchline; pushed the rest of it away like a bad meal. She focused instead on the words way out and started searching for that.

Any exit short of death, shed have to consider. Maybe even that, eventually.

The first thing she established was that she was not being absorbed by a god. She was being absorbed by an organism with god-like powers; powers that could be exerted over the creatures of this world, in any case. Was there a difference? A practical difference?

Well, she had to guess so.

This organism had been in the service of men. That demoted it to an organic level, a level on which she might stand some chance of competing. Or, at the very least, of finding some means of escape. If the process she had undergone was organic, her logic argued, then maybe it could be reversed. On the other hand, not all organic processes were reversible, of course: death, she appreciated with morbid irony, being a prime example.

Still, she probed tentatively outwards through the sponge, reaching and stretching with awareness. It was like one of those relaxation techniques, where you find your centre and then isolate every muscle, every limb in turn, just to tighten them and then let them go. Except she was probing a body that wasnt her own, and the exertion might well drain what little was left of her. It was, unsurprisingly, the opposite of relaxing.

What she found, eventually, in all the intestinal tracts and corridors of this organism, dripping with darkness and the digestive juices of an alien mind, was not a way out. That had been a lie. It was merely the work-inprogress of a line of research that had been abandoned due to excessive cost in manpower and resources. Not so much a way out as a sketch of a door on a wall; a deception, an illusion much like Peris perception of her current torment. But it did offer the faintest of hopes: a possible means of reaching for the Doctor, of calling to him and imploring him to come get her out of this. Little more than a cry for help given physical form.

A message in a bottle.

Her work was cut out for her, in actually crafting the bottle in question. And then there was the question of whether or not her message could ever reach the Doctor.

Creation is a far greater trauma than destruction. Destruction negates feelings altogether, whereas creation is a labour of love. There is the pain of that labour and then there is, unless youre a god (depending on what religious angle youre coming from), the burden of responsibility for your creation; and that will last a lifetime. On the other hand, if you happen to outlive your creation, you will bear the pain of its destruction far longer and harder than you bore the pain of its conception and birth.

Peri entertained these thoughts only in a vague, surreal sense, as she gave birth to her messenger.

All the materials were at hand in the sponge-form: ova and sperm, the pieces of the puzzle called life. In this organism, those seeds had been subjected to mutations, modifications, such that, with some maternal coaxing, life of a far greater complexity could be nurtured into being. Just as Peri had been absorbed into the mass of sponge, so she found that she could now guide and govern the process that sprouted something approximating a human form from the walls of one of its internal canals.

Her level of control was limited to that of a novice at a potters wheel; she had no power to mould the clay in her own image.

She just had to make do.

Once her brainchild was full-grown, with an umbilical cord of sponge still attached to the newly-formed skull, Peri needed to gift her with a consciousness: her own. But she tried hard not to think of it in such divine terms because that would have been too much like giving in to godhood.

Imagining herself akin to one of those screwy old gardening-types who talked to their plants, Peri exhaled some thoughts like a gentle breath along the umbilical cord, causing it to expand dramatically and begin sprouting pink-grey cauliflower-like masses to fill her creations brain cavity. She was pouring particles of her being into its cells, like sunlight into the pores of a plant. Perisynthesis.

There was no remnant of Peri in the form or features; the woman didnt even qualify as a poor copy. But Peri could step in and out of her virginal mind, to prod and prompt like an angel or a devil on her

shoulder. She could see through her eyes, too, the instant they snapped open. The finished article, Peris creation, detached herself from the sponge wall and stood there in the birth canal like Frankensteins created bride. Or rather, like a wallflower that the Creature turned down.

The scalp started knitting straight away over the wound where the umbilical cord had torn free. Hair follicles began sending their first tentative shoots up through the skin. Peris woman would have slightly coarse auburn hair. In time.

As the first item on the womans agenda, clothing might not have seemed essential: the woman herself had no awareness of her nakedness. But Peri had taken more than one bite of the forbidden fruit, and she knew she wouldnt be able to face the Doctor in a naked body.

Even one that wasnt her own.

At other times, it might not have bothered her. The Doctors attention was so far from lascivious as to qualify as indifference. No sexuality, no shame. But Peri had been laid bare in so many other ways, far more intimate ways, that she would feel, passing before the Doctors gaze, like a patient coming round from the anaesthetic to find herself still under the surgeons knife. A laboratory study in all shades of human weakness and guilt.

To be digested by an alien organism was one thing. To be dissected by the perceived judgment of such a close friend who might previously have retained some respect for her well, the prospect alone was unbearable. Hang that for a game of soldiers; she was getting herself dressed.

The available wardrobe was limited: a few rags and cast-offs found littered around the corridors of this organism. So Peri had to extend her search farther afield. The woman felt nothing; she simply obeyed Peris every impulse as if her body were Peris own. So it was Peri who went swimming, enjoying the flow of seawater in and around her borrowed contours; and it was Peri who, holding her breath like a pearl diver, descended to the ocean bed in search of remnant uniforms that she could slip loose from the dead inhabitants of wrecks.

She collected bundles of other basic supplies too: some planking, lightweight packing materials, anything she could prise free from what had once been vessels. Once she had brought all these things to

the surface, she worked hard to bind them together with strands of seaweed, anchoring the whole construction in place with a crate full of naval ordinance while she did so. At last the makeshift raft was finished and she cut it loose, ready to set sail. To head for the island where, through the eyes of others, she had glimpsed the Doctor.

She had no precise fix on the island, but knew that the information was there to be found within the Memory. She simply had to dip her mental toes in and take care not to wade in out of her depth; otherwise, the undertow would catch hold of her and drag her apart.

Peri sifted through the Memory for more nugget-like visions of the Doctor, grabbing onto each fleeting image as a navigator might seize upon the twinkle of a chosen star. Mostly they were distorted images: low-angle shots from some marine creature scuttling furiously across a beach, or blurred, headachy ones from deep inside a tunnel or cave.

But they were there, all the same. And they were unmistakeably of the Doctor.

As navigators went, Peri was no Magellan, but she had determination and desperation on her side. That, and the fact that she experienced the rigours of the voyage only second-hand, through her surrogate body. The woman endured them all without question, and Peri promised her food milk and honey? just as soon as she reached the island.

First, though, there was the matter of hauling her raft ashore and finding a suitable spot in which to erect it as a lean-to. Peri, a gracious creator, afforded the woman shelter and respite before sending her hunting, feeding her, then sending her hunting again this time for the Doctor.

Then came the immense frustration of the woman being forced to retreat in terror

after having come so close, having actually seen the Doctor standing there! as she was attacked, fired upon. After that, she sought some kind of weapon with which she might defend herself, and found the rifle at the supply dump.

The womans own instinct for survival took the lead at that point. Something innate, inborn. Something perhaps embedded in Peri herself, or perhaps not. Something, at any rate, that prompted the woman, on her third attempt, to move in on the beach under cover of darkness. Something predatory or fearful; Peri couldnt be sure which.

Her own shattered senses were jarring and merging at once, in a confused intuitive kaleidoscope, with those of her creation, out there in the real world.

Whoevers senses they were, they gave rise to something close to nervous anxiety as the woman crept into the hollow silence of the cave. The crackle of dying firelight was a warning, but not as powerful a deterrent as the presence lurking at the very rear of the cave, so still that it might have been part of the rock wall itself.

Worse still, the same senses gave rise to something approaching phobia when a creature resembling a crab scuttled up behind her. And Peri couldnt be sure if it was she who screamed or only the woman.

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Scrounger has fond memories of the days following Rangers arrival on the Beach.

As the community got to know the newcomer, Scrounger thought to gather things fish, tools, useful bits and pieces as offerings to lay outside his cave. The fish aside, Ranger was grateful for them. Surprised and grateful. He started to favour Scrounger without really thinking. It wasnt long before Scrounger came to regard himself as Rangers friend. It was a start.

One day, Ranger came up with something new. An idea hed had.

What I could really use, he said, twining a length of rope that Scrounger had trawled from the sea the day before, is some extra pairs of eyes. We need to keep the Beach safe, guard it. Maybe rig something to trawl some fish in, too, to keep a steady food supply. Thatd save my grenades and save you boys having to go hunting on my account. Not that it aint appreciated, you understand. And defences; were going to need defences. Aint a lotta people around, but anyone does come theyre gonna be the enemy, see. My people, they all left for home. His expression grew melancholy as his gaze surfed the waves coming in. I was through fighting before they were. In an instant, he snapped back to smiling at Scrounger. Anyway, you little guys, youd get something for your pains, a lot of know-how. He tapped the side of his head, deep in the straggly black hair. Live and exclusive, direct out of Rangers brain.

Shit, there aint a whole lot in there, but what there is, youre welcome to. Ha!

Ranger was always laughing. Scrounger liked the feel of it in the air, tickling his eyes.

So when Ranger lifted him onto his lap, Scrounger sat quite still, trusted him. You get to be the first, Ranger announced, and dug a cloth pouch from his pocket. A few nifty movements of his fingers, and hed produced a small syringe. My blood bro.

Then he was slapping at his arm, pumping up a vein and sticking the needle in.

Scrounger watched as the barrel of the syringe turned dark red. When it was full, Ranger withdrew the needle from his arm and started to hunt around with his fingers all over Scroungers underside. All I needs a place to stick you, little guy.

Pausing suddenly, Ranger admitted to Scrounger that he was going to be getting only a poor substitute for the real thing. Usually, when they get you on the table, they give you this … stuff graft it onto you like a new appendix or something. An appendix, yeah. His laugh was a sour sort of sound. Gives you the index to all sorts of information.

The Memory, Scrounger comprehended. So that was how it was done.

The revelation brought all sorts of questions rising to the surface, drifting here and there like flotsam, begging him to take his pick and find something useful, something constructive in all their midst. Questions that surfaced from time to time, he was sure somehow, in every mind. Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here?

Common enough to fear the unknown; that was only natural. But when the unknown was yourself, there was nowhere to run or hide. The questions stayed with you, inside your shell.

Grows inside you like a tumour, can you get that? Rangers eyes had developed a sheen, like a silver screen onto which the images were projecting themselves. A benevolent tumour in your brain. Cancer just the thing for you guys! Supposed to do all that stuff your brain forgot how. When I got mine, I thought I was going to wake up like the goddamn Mekon. Scrounger had to surf the Memory, scour those other depths, for a reference to the Mekon. He became preoccupied for a moment, clueing himself in on the exploits of one Dan Dare, until Ranger finished chuckling. But it doesnt make you psychic or anything. Just plugs you online, hooks you into this thing they call the Memory, so you dont feel left out. So youre one with it. Part of the machine:

A nervous tremor shook the side of Rangers face, and he rode it out with a fragile grin, pretending that it was nothing. Part of the machine. Only only only A stammer had a hold of him, and he was a couple of minutes fighting it off. Only it needs feeding, see, like any organ. Thats why you guys are all here, out on your own, I guess. Youve lost touch with the Memory.

Not lost touch, thought Scrounger. Just lost guidance, the contact of his special friend, the voice, leading him through the ocean of the Memory, and steering his course in the real world too. Without that, he and the others had simply been finding their own way in both.

Yeah, you lost your guide, nodded Ranger, as though hed overheard the thought.

Ill be your guide. You guys just get to be my eyes. Well make a great team.

Ranger searched again with his fingers and located a gap under Scroungers shell, where a leg protruded. The feel of fingertip on flesh was strangely warm. Ranger plunged the needle in just there, and Scrounger felt the flood of something warmer passing into him. Then the needle was gone, and Scrounger looked up to see Ranger licking the tip of the syringe before tucking it back into his pouch, stowing it away again like a guilty secret.

The trade concluded, Ranger sat in silence, quivering as if fighting down a chill wave of nausea, before finally turning on a grin. Were blood brothers now, he said.

And Scrounger felt that laugh of his in a whole new way. A special way.

The woman backs off. Retreats. Only a few steps, but enough.

Maybe she knows its not her fight. The key point: Scrounger knows it. This is something between him and Meathook. And with all the tenacity of his species, no way is Meathook letting it go. Not until hes good and done.

Revenge. That has to be it.

But why? Like who am I?, its one of those inescapable questions, set to echo around inside his shell until some sort of answer comes down from on high. If there is an on high. Maybe the answer lies in the Memory, but who will help him find it? Ranger?

Certainly not Meathook. But maybe who am I? and why? are separate fragments of the same question.

Even as all that surfaces, Scrounger can read the revenge itself the personal angle in the straight furrows that the monster is cutting through the sand. Meathook is aiming straight for his prey, straight for Scrounger, because only Scrounger will sate this appetite.

Ranger once theorised that Meathook was one of the enemys. He was bulkier, had heavier bones. Just the way they would build them; just the way they built their warships. Maybe, Ranger had suggested wearily, half in and out of his pained fevers, the enemy had their own similar programme. Meathook just had that look about him: like hed been overweight to begin with, grown fatter since on the flesh of his smaller foes. Plus he had the advanced stages of an unpleasant personality syndrome.

Scrounger yanks hard on his trapped leg, leans into the flow. The river, finally, pushes him free; nudges him, bit by bit, towards the monster. Out of the frying pan

The frying pan. If the woman has such a thing, thats where, Scrounger realises, he might have ended up. As he totters downstream towards his enemys clacking pincer, Scrounger sees his human foe in glimpses. Her rifle is no longer a club; shes lifting it and firing it, repeatedly, hesitantly, into the waves. A thrilled expression breaks the surface on her war-stained face, as though somewhere inside she has discovered what she was made for. Her true purpose in life.

She fires her shots in bursts; automatic fire, sprayed into the sea of shells.

But Meathook is undeterred. Scrounger can still hear that pincer snapping the air to pieces. He battles his way to the edge of the stream, even as he slides closer to the sea and closer to his nemesis. Meathook veers to intercept, stalks, swivels greedily, trying to keep his prey in sight. His huge left claw is poised in anticipation of the killing blow.

Revenge. But why?

Perhaps, Scrounger figures, Meathook somehow worked it out: who it was that fed that Stevedore class to the ocean. Maybe the Memory told him. Then the monster came looking for him. Found him out at

that derelict, sent it to the bottom, then pursued him to the Beach. Came to terrorise him and kill his friends, then hound him to death. And on the way amassed an army of followers. But apart from the latter, its all guesswork.

The fear that Scrounger feels; thats the only hard evidence.

Yes, fear. He can feel it in Meathooks followers, too; but theirs is a curious variant of his. Scroungers fear is primitive, instinctual, a spur for the choice to fight or run. Theirs is a rationalised breed; they have no choice but to submit and follow. Revenge and leadership. These are the stuff of human minds. Meathook has plainly inherited some entry qualifications for a higher form of life. Another rung up the evolutionary ladder.

Scrounger, cursing his injury, limps and scrabbles over the wet sand. There, the waves crash in, threatening to sweep him off his legs.

And Meathooks steam-loco pursuit founders again and again in deep troughs. Hes battling against his own monstrous weight, missing the support of the sea, but refusing to accept the sight of the little guy getting away.

A smart little guy.

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The Doctor scrambled and slid down to the Beach. The scrape and clack of his crab companions, skittering down the broken limb of rocks, was close behind him. The scene that greeted him made him feel like a forgotten extra in a madcap B-movie: Night of A Thousand Pincers. Taking a split-second decision, he hared off across the Beach, trying to make some sense of the insanity around him.

The woman stood in the centre of the nightmare, at the heart of it, her face white as the moon and engraved with hard terror. She was blasting away with an automatic rifle, spraying bullets into an advancing wave of crabs. As the guns throat croaked dry and empty, she screamed in frustration a hateful, rupturing sound. Then she ended her cull with a triumphant dash to the sea, wading out into the shallow waves as if bent on reaping her harvest.

The Doctor, on the run, glimpsed her beating back the milling, snicking pincers with the butt of her rifle and stooping to pick up the meat of the dead.

Leave them! Get to the boat! He was uncertain if she had heeded his call. The boat! Its our only chance! He thought maybe he saw her glance along the Beach to where the boat awaited its maiden voyage. But he had no time to stop and make sure.

The army of crabs meanwhile rolled in across the sand. They swarmed and clambered over each other, many spilling greedily into the corral, turning the water frothing pink here and there in the moonlight as they started chopping the fish to pieces.

Their main mass seemed to move almost like a Roman legion, shells locked together like ancient shields. But the formation was far too ragged and undisciplined; they were a savage rabble in armour, with hunger and greed driving their every move. Once loose in the corral or on the rest of the Beach, for that matter they would feast until they were done; until there was nothing left to eat. And not even their leader would be able to rein in a mob in that primitive mood. It had been obvious, looking down from the cliff, that Meathook had instigated the attack; but now it was just as obvious that he had something else on his mind. Namely, exclusively: Scrounger.

Scrounger was scampering along the shoreline. It was the desperate faltering run of an injured animal. Occasionally has was caught by a wave and spirited up in a wash of foam; but then he was off and running again as soon as the sea receded and deposited him back on the sand.

Meathook could only crawl along by comparison, but he was relentless, zeroed in on his prey and oblivious to everything else. The waves washed over him and he kept on going, paying them about as much attention as a rock might.

A few of Meathooks faithful had flocked to their leaders cause and joined the chase. Not only was Scrounger outweighed by Meathook, he was also outnumbered six to one.

They were already well along the mined flank of the Beach. There was no way that the Doctor could reach them. Not that he had any idea what he might have done if he could. Pick up Scrounger and run? Far too heavy. Stamp on Meathook and hope for the best? Might as well stamp on a tank.

No, he had to stick with his first impulse and keep on sprinting for the cave.

The Doctor became aware of Dungbeetle and Scuttlebutt racing along

at his heels.

No! he shouted back under his arm. Ill get Ranger! Hell be all right! He didnt know that for sure, but he could always outdo Nostradamus when it came to lending even his flimsiest of predictions authority and conviction. Go and help Scrounger.

Then all of you get to the boat!

It was bad enough that he had to leave these creatures to fight their own desperate battle. But on top of that, in that last instruction there had been a surprisingly painful admission. The Doctor had invested only a few days of his time here no more than a grain or two in his own sand clock but it was always hard to abandon something worth defending. And that was exactly what he was preparing to do.

But the fact was, whether he found Ranger alive or not, the Beach was already going the way of too many of its inhabitants. An ideal bleeding away into the ocean. A future dissolving.

The cave extended further back into the darkness than the Doctor had anticipated.

Something snapped, bone-like, underfoot. A twig? The Doctor didnt think so. It echoed loudly more loudly in some ways than the sounds of explosions rolling in from outside. Like the pricking of a conscience.

A sharp, sudden intake of breath betrayed Rangers presence. Wide, terrified eyes popped out of the shadows. They fixed, unblinking, on the Doctor.

Ranger, coaxed the Doctor firmly, we have to get out of here. There are crabs all over the Beach, and theyre busy devouring everything.

For a moment, Ranger seemed frozen in his dark trance. Then he stated flatly: Its revenge.

Revenge? Revenge for what? What can those creatures know about revenge? Revenge is one of the baser emotions, Ill grant you, but its still the province of higher minds. Human minds, in the main.

You dont know. Rangers voice fractured into sobs. You dont know.

No, youre right, I dont. But I need you, Ranger, to help me understand. And these creatures, your friends from the Beach, they need you too. They need you most of all.

The Doctor edged forwards, picking his way with care over the uneven surface. Still, all he could see were Rangers eyes, and now only infrequently, as they intermittently gaped wide at some horror that only he could see, or screwed down tight against some pain that only he could feel.

Ranger, I need to see where Im going. Dont be afraid of the light. Dont be afraid of me, I wont hurt you. The light might hurt your eyes a little, but it wont hurt you

Ranger chuckled, then coughed a fluid sort of cough as if he couldnt keep his food down. Im not so sure about that. The light, the truth, theyre the same thing. They both hurt the eyes, and thats not all.

Im not sure what you mean, but Im here to help you. The Doctor eased his flashlight up out of his pocket, made a point of aiming it down at the ground as he placed his thumb on the switch. Here, Im switching it on now, you might want to cover your eyes.

The Doctor switched on the light, lit up a small cone of the cave. Ranger flinched and started twitching convulsively. He doubled over and vomited right in his own lap.

Perhaps, the Doctor considered gravely, he should have shielded his own eyes.

Spindly, armour-plated legs were scattered about the cave floor like broken sticks.

Thinktanks plastic hubcap-like shell lay battered and upturned, blood smears and knotted strings of flesh caking its insides; a meat dish that Ranger hadnt quite managed to scrape clean.

Fragments of other shells, pieces of other limbs, littered the back of the cave like banquet-hall debris. No wonder Ranger felt sick.

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Not for the first time, Scrounger is on his own. The Doctor has disappeared in the direction of Rangers cave. The woman has run off to the boat, probably with the intention of stealing it and making her own escape.

Its down to Scrounger versus Meathook. Middleweight versus Super

Heavyweight. And the waves, if not exactly Meathooks ally, are being less than friendly to Scrounger.

The latest of them breaks apart in splashes, but sweeps in with enough force to pick Scrounger up and carry him a foot up the Beach. He endures the rough treatment with patience, ready to be on the run again as soon as he touches down. But suddenly, no.

Its not that simple this time.

Just as he dips again, the wash of water letting him fall, his flailing legs scratch against metal. Scroungers next step could well be his last: he knows the layout of his jerry-rigged minefield like the inside of his own shell. Curling his left legs underneath himself, he kicks out with his right, borrowing whats left of the lift from the nearly-spent wave.

It carries him a vital few inches. He drops down safely. The seawater washes back, revealing j ust how close to the mine hes landed.

Meathook powers along after him, straight through the next incoming wave, losing no ground to the ocean. Smaller followers Middleweights and Heavyweights are gaining ground, coming up around their leaders flanks. Joining his blood feud against Scrounger.

Scrounger keeps one eye on the incoming wave, plots the area again in his mind and realises just how densely the mines are planted along this stretch of sand. This next wave could be the death of him. He braces himself, roots himself in the sand.

But Meathook and his troops are bearing in on him. Hes trapped. Between a rock and a hard place.

Two small shapes come scurrying between the mines like fat spiders, darting dangerously close under the monstrous claws of Meathooks brethren, nipping between and at their legs then losing themselves in the surf, as it crashes in and sluices them nicely up the Beach. Dungbeetle and Scuttlebutt brave far beyond their size, and light enough to dance on the mines, if they ever felt so inclined, without fear of harm.

Well above the waters reach, on the other side of the minefield, Crane clacks his pincers loudly; a come-and-get-me challenge thrown at the invaders. Bucket hangs back nearer the rocks, but makes his best show of looking defiant. That daring little raid by Dungbeetle and Scuttlebutt must have infuriated the enemy, because two of them veer off immediately and drive against the backwash of the retreating wave

to rise to Cranes challenge.

A dumb, blind charge. Their last steps. Scrounger has the most fleeting of moments in which to hope that Meathook takes the bait too. His thoughts are interrupted

Ka-boom. A mine explodes like a hammer-blow striking up through hells ceiling. One 600mm tore warhead wired to a proximity sensor, set to trigger at an approximation of Scroungers own mass and upwards. Simple. Neat.

Both dead crab-soldiers complete messy trajectories and land in pieces halfway up the Beach. A shower of sand and salt water rains down around their remains, amid the flop and thump of broken shells and dead flesh.

Meathook and his four remaining disciples pause to reconsider their approach.

Scrounger nervously meets their collective gaze, running rapidly through his own options. Very rapidly: its a very short list.

Then Dozer comes out of nowhere, cutting everyones options down to zero.

Hes ploughing straight across the minefield, pushing up a wall of sand with his great shovel-like claws. And before long, hes done what he must have intended to do: hes unearthed a mine and is shoving it along in front of him; a berserker warrior in a suicidal shield charge. Scroungers eyestalks shrink at the sight.

Meathook drops to the sand, turning himself to stone. His squad of soldiers scamper round in front of him, forming a solid wall of shells, just as the earthbound missile homes in on them. Scrounger is in awe that Meathooks madness should inspire such devotion.

Dozer and the wall of crabs are all cast heavenward in an almighty explosion. Its done.

For a while, Scrounger scans the scene, watching the shattered and scattered corpses as they fall back to earth, his already thin hopes thinning with the blast-cloud.

There are no pieces quite large enough for his liking. Its to be expected. Meathook is invincible.

Still, Scrounger will not waste Dozers insane sacrifice. He runs while Meathook gathers his senses and lifts himself back onto his girder-like legs.

A fleeting scan of the Beach reveals that the boat has gone.

Scrounger knows now that the Beach is lost. This time, he runs for the sea.

Scrounger sits in the boat, but feels very much outside it. And outside much more besides.

He was the last to come on board. He made his getaway out across the seabed as, behind them, the Beach fell to the enemy. Then he got ahead of the boat and snipped loose a clump of seaweed from his body so that he could float to the surface and swim to meet it. The Doctor lifted him into the vessel. Since then, little has been said.

There are unspoken communications passing between the faces of the humans on board

the Doctor, Ranger and the woman. But there are only unspoken questions in the hovering eyes of his fellows Dungbeetle, Scuttlebutt, Crane and Bucket. Its as if questions and doubts and uncertainties are all that is left of the Beach community.

Of course, thinks Scrounger, thats what the future is made of. But in his case, the past is comprised of the same ingredients, and that bothers him more.

There are answers, perhaps, buried back on the Beach, or deep inside Meathooks twisted psyche; or maybe here in the boat, in thoughts passing like threads between those in the know. Scrounger can almost read the Doctors eyes, weaving their expressions into some coherent, meaningful pattern. An altogether darker night is descending over the Doctors features, reflecting something of what he has seen.

Ranger lies bundled in the bow of the boat, little more than cargo; but he is drooling, and his eyes are wide and searching, resembling those of a guilty puppy, seeking approval or forgiveness from his master. Or in this case, the Doctor.

The Doctor, though, is too busy with his own thoughts, too busy steering the boat and too busy interrogating the woman. The latter task is made all the more difficult by the fact that she can barely speak. Words stumble out of her, clumsy and ill-formed.

Deformed, even.

ThMemry. ThMemry, she repeats between her other incoherent pleas.

The Doctor presses her again and again for something more. Hes growing irate and frustrated, urging her to focus, to concentrate; asking her again and again who she is, where she came from, what she wants. Scrounger, all the while, feels he wants to interject and point out the sobering possibility that she simply doesnt know.

If so, he knows how she feels.

The Doctor is stopped then, silenced by the tears rolling out of the womans eyes.

Perhaps he recognises her frustration, her isolation. Maybe he reads the appeal for help in her tears. Whatever he sees in her just then, the shadows lengthen across his gaze.

ThMemry. ThMemry, she repeats, between fresh floods of tears.

Ranger! The Doctor spins around, and his shout has the eyes of every soldier-crab standing to attention. Its like one of the commands theyd hear, back during the war, the voice echoing in their heads and galvanising them into some new action.

Ranger! Snap out of it! The Memory! We need to reach the Memory! This is your chance to make amends! She knows the truth, you know the truth, and the Memory is where I can find out! You must know the way! Where, Ranger? Tell me!

Memry Lane, mumbles Ranger. His eyes are trying to cry, but its almost as if theyre turning inwards somehow. Memry Lane! Dont go there. Dont take me there! A jolt shoots through him, as though he wants to sit up, but all his energy is spent in the scream.

The Doctor has the bearing of a general, a tyrant. We have to, Ranger! We must!

Scrounger agrees. Memory Lane. A metaphor for the past. There is nothing more fearful than the unknown; all the same, thats exactly where Scrounger needs to go.

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For the Doctor, it was as if the shockwaves were still rippling out from

that first blast that had cast him adrift in this ocean; or, more than that, from every explosion, every shot fired in the war that had been waged across this globe. If there was ever going to be any kind of calm here, he would have to calm the storm.

But how was he to manage that, while the storm raged on in the minds of men like Ranger? And of creatures like Meathook.

It was obvious now that Meathook had not been back to the Beach since the night he had attacked Ranger. But why had he attacked in the first place? Was it payback for Rangers ferocious defence of his fish farm? Or revenge for some earlier incident?

Impossible to say. It was difficult enough to fathom Rangers heavily cratered mind.

What could have driven the man to prey upon his friends? The injuries inflicted upon him in Meathooks attack? Or some older wounds opened up, perhaps, by the Doctors own insistent questioning? Again, impossible to say. The possibility, though, was sufficient to prompt the Doctor to shoulder his own share of the responsibility. He wasnt responsible for the war, possibly wasnt even responsible for Rangers state of mind. But his merely being here, his involvement, shifted the responsibility for all of it squarely onto him.

It was as though he were the centre of gravity where responsibility was concerned.

He was as responsible right now for Ranger, the woman, Scrounger and his few friends, as he was for Peri and all his other companions. It was down to him, as always, to save the victims from the monsters.

Sometimes it was difficult to tell them apart.

The Doctor watched the woman, crouched low and peering over the side of the boat at something happening deep below. As the surface started to churn, she stood slowly and a little unsteadily, with something like childish excitement sparkling in her eyes.

She looked back at the Doctor, and seemed to be on the point of applauding herself, like a female version of Moses marvelling at her own ability to part the waves.

Standing, the Doctor came up beside her and laid a hand on her shoulder, steadying them both as they watched the waves part.

A great grey-pink limb suddenly mushroomed up through the surface as though cut loose from the sea bed. The resulting swell of the ocean rocked the boat, but the Doctor had braced his stance firmly and regarded the gigantic, bobbing limb like Captain Ahab staring into the eye of the great white whale. Except, instead of eyes, this particular sea monster sported a number of blister-like membranes around its sprawling, sponge-pitted body.

The Memory. Ranger whimpered, clutching his head as though pained by the sight. He cowered even further down in the boat. Get it away from here! Get it away!

Its all right! the Doctor shouted back at him, one hand patting the womans shoulder heartily. I think shes just given us a way in!

Then it occurred to him that, of course, that could be exactly what had made Ranger so terrified.

Memory Lane was a winding tunnel of living tissue and membranes, permanently wet like the innards of some animal. The floor was slick and springy, and sucked at their bare feet as the Doctor led his motley band of stragglers deeper into this very tangible nightmare.

For lighting, all they had to rely on was a continuous series of electrical pulses shooting along the fleshly tunnels, sometimes overhead, sometimes below them. The light, it seemed, was always there, but always travelling; forever speeding by on some unknown errand, sparking from some new direction.

Air and lighting. The Doctor was impressed. Curious as this place is, it seems to have been inhabited at some point in its life.

The woman nodded dumbly. And Ranger nodded fitfully, as though startled by every bright pulse that went past.

There had been enough give in the outer membrane for the Doctor to be able to lean into it and push through. A small helping of ocean had got in with him, but had quickly seeped away, sucked into the absorbent walls and floor. It was a process that had been repeated as each of the Doctors escorts had joined him. Then they had pushed on through an inner membrane and worked their way down a slippery, hollow limb into the deep interior.

The air here was pressurised, too, so it was difficult to gauge depth. But however far they had descended, the Doctor felt safe to assume that they were somewhere on the ocean bed. The woman was their

guide, leading them along in half-eager, half-fearful fits and starts. She seemed keen for them to keep moving, but always anxious that she didnt stray too far ahead.

Scrounger and his fellows brought up the rear, their eyestalks constantly roving over the walls as if expecting the fleshy material to swallow and digest them all.

Ranger was practically an invertebrate, and the Doctor had to play the part of his backbone, propping him up with hard, brick-like commands laid down one after the other; a wall of authority designed to defeat any argument and to brace any weakness.

The woman suddenly stopped walking and plunged into a small alcove, burrowing inside it as if searching the back of a cluttered cupboard. She pulled out rags and remnants of uniforms and coveralls. There was a mute appeal in her eyes as she tried to explain but found herself unable to form intelligible words.

Curious, remarked the Doctor, unable to make neither head nor tail of her infantile mumblings. He passed a glance over some of the rags. A poor sort of wardrobe. Looks like these clothes have been dumped here; disposed of.

The woman nodded, then discarded the rags and led them on. Ranger moaned as if suffering under the weight of a migraine. He carried his gun loosely, having seemingly almost forgotten it was in his hands, although he had resisted every attempt by the Doctor to persuade him to leave it behind.

The small party passed through a few chambers housing the remains of equipment, benches and other basic furnishings, all of it strewn everywhere, as if a small bomb had hit a military-surplus jumble sale. Seems this Memory served as a base of some kind. Abandoned just like the rest of this world, hmm? The Doctor looked at Ranger.

Like everything, spat Ranger, regarding some of the overturned benches hatefully.

The Doctor saw Rangers grip tighten a little on his rifle. Perhaps its best if we keep moving: He crossed the chamber, marching boldly after the woman, who beckoned to them from the entrance to the next tunnel.

As they negotiated their way deeper into the strange warren, a change descended over the woman. She padded along with a kind of haunted reverence in her eyes. The Doctor had made scant little sense of her infantile mumblings, but the way she had forged them an entrance implied some deep connection between her and these ghoulish caverns of flesh. He knew hed find the truth, eventually, lurking deep within these cerebral convolutions. And he knew that it would be, as Ranger had put it, at least as harsh as light on ill-adapted eyes.

But without knowing what that truth was, how could he be sure of his ability to deal with it? How could he prepare himself for the worst? In a universe this vast, only the universe could know what form the worst actually took.

There were more membranes to push through along their route. They found themselves traversing a maze of other passages, sometimes climbing up or dropping down, too, as the woman navigated them through the unknown. The Doctor was searching for another unknown, he reflected, and one that he felt sure would be the worst that this particular world had to offer.

After seemingly endless meanderings, they arrived at a chamber where the light pulses sparked with greater intensity. It was as though all those travelling pulses crashed into each other at this major intersection, over and over again, producing a flickering strobe effect to light whatever sinister activities took place here.

The chamber was little more than a bubble, an embolism, in the midst of one of these contorted passages of flesh. A single brain sprouted from the wall; a cauliflower of pink-grey meat with spongy veins coursing around it and holding it aloft, like some organic object lodged in a small tree of flesh. Fluids trickled from the sponge and into the brains maze-like surface.

Scrounger and the others waited uncertainly at the entrance to the chamber. The woman tottered in and sank to her knees, as if utterly spent. Her mouth dropped open and wounded sounds spilled out. The Doctor stared, a frown taking hold of his features.

Ranger, abandoned by his backbone, collapsed against the near wall and lay there punching uselessly at its flesh, screaming into it and crying out whatever was left of his heart. Gradually he quietened and curled himself into a tight ball, with his arms wrapped around his head. He rocked pathetically back and forth, whimpering and muttering curses, profanities and the frightened, timid pleas of a

beaten child.

The woman scrabbled around on the salivating floor and picked up some scraps of fabric, holding them up for the Doctor to see, like the shreds of her own life. They were, he realised, the torn fragments of a wetsuit. Glancing around, he saw more of them strewn across the ground, close to the brain, and some oxygen cylinders cast against one of the walls.

The Doctor, finally, dropped to his knees directly in front of the offending growth.

Peri?

Truth. Too harsh a light on some eyes. Ranger had been so right about that; and of course he should know. It was obvious he had learned from personal experience. The Doctor didnt rate his own capacity for shock-absorption here in the Memory; so he was going to have to try the indirect approach. Via Ranger.

Ranger! You shared some sort of rapport with the Beach community! You must possess an interface! Ranger regarded him blankly, as if there was no sound reaching him.

The Doctor took a hold of the mans head and started rooting carefully through his dark, matted hair, like a nurse scouring a childs scalp for nits. The visible part of the interface was a spongy wart-like eruption through the mans skin and presumably his skull. It was into this that the Doctor needed to plug himself, somehow.

Thinking quickly, he directed Dungbeetle to cut loose one strand of the nerve fibres that decked out the chamber like rather grisly Christmas lights. An electrical pulse shot through poor Dungbeetle and tossed him across the floor, all twitchy and jittery, but not before hed cut free a length of the living flex.

Er, thank you, said the Doctor, shamefaced. Keeping one eye on the little chap to make sure that he was recovering, he set about wiring in the fibre to Rangers interface. Now, Peri, listen to me! Stay focused! Once Ive split the end of this fibre, Im going to touch each fork to my temples and hopefully complete an adequate neural circuit. Im going to join you in there!

He pressed the fibres to his head, and touched the borders of a hidden world.

It was like knocking at the gates of a forbidden, haunted fortress. A ghostly horde, he knew, was lying in ambush within. A host of black memories.

But before they could reach him as soon as he threw open the gates Peri bombarded him with countless snapshots of crabs on the march: such a barrage of images, it was impossible to tell how many crabs there were. The images were recent rather than current he knew that without having to ask and gave a clashing kaleidoscope of viewpoints, this crab and that. On the Beach, a giant monster of a crab rallied his troops at least, the ones that could be rallied. Others lost themselves in a feeding frenzy within the corral. But it seemed that their general could do without them; Meathook, apparently, had bigger fish to fry. Peri scanned forward and, sure enough, more images came: a small army of crabs on a crusade, on the rampage, marching across the ocean floor. It was painfully clear that they were marching on the Memory. And there was a broader, overbearing pain, breaking through the Memory like a thunderstorm; confirmation, if any were needed, that Peris images were memories, slightly out of date.

Meathook and his army were already here.

The Doctor is powerless. He is tied to the interface, chained to Ranger, anchored to the Memory. And to Peri. He dare not break that link now.

All he can do is shout, and hope that Scrounger and the others will hear him, out there in the real world. Theyre breaking in! I need time! Hold them off as best you can!

He can also, of course, communicate with Peri: Send the woman, Peri. Send her to help them.

Somewhere in the distance, bubbling up as though from impossible ocean depths, he hears something like a voice; something like Peris voice: All right, Doctor. Ill do what I can. Just, please, do what you can for me, okay?

The Doctor thinks her a smile: I will, Peri. I will. The Doctor is Ranger.

Hes exhausted, stinks of mud and subtropical sweat, and has the stale aftertaste of monkey-meat on his breath. The monkey-meats pretty much all theyve had to eat since the order came through to conserve rations, on account of the main assault having been put back three times now, for reasons best known to the REMFs. He and his squad

have been stalking bad-guy patrols for days following them being the best way of evading them and plotting positions of CPs, OPs, comms stations, bunkers, weapons emplacements, latrines, the lot. By this point he knows Island G12 like the back of his hand. No, better than that, because the back of his hand is a changing map, welts and scratches and stains marking it in all sorts of new ways every day.

But at last the order has come through. Today is the day. His job: to take out the point-defence guidance so that the naval bombardment can actually do some damage. The defence screen forms a dome over the island, like an invisible shell; a radar shield designed to detect anything lobbed in that direction and swat it out of the sky with a counter-launch.

If they were going to stand any chance of taking this piece of turf, that needed to be out of the picture, pronto.

Enemy subs are thinning out, but supply ships are still vulnerable, and so far neither side has come up with a way to sink an island. Real estate is at a premium on this world, and its up for grabs for whoever can smack the hardest.

Today, hopefully, thatll be the good guys.

Ranger splits his squad in two, dispatches one half to take out the backup while he and his partner go in to kill the main system. Its a stealth gig; the enemys low on manpower here, and unprepared for an infiltration: Ranger and his squad have been that careful over the past few days

The enemy dont go down without a firefight, though, and bullets razor every which way through the foliage. Ranger takes a stinging graze along his forearm, but steels himself against the burn and squeezes off a volley or three of his own. He brings down two of the bastards right there in the undergrowth.

His partners down, gargling blood, but Rangers got to be up and getting the job done. He moves in, pops another two guards, sweeps his rifle around, searching for any others. All looks clear. He closes in on the sensor rig, hunkers down and starts turning out the charges from his pack. His rifles right by his side and his eyes are checking all over the place, alert for the first signs of any more bad guys coming his way. job done, he scurries back into the undergrowth.

Hes sitting with his back against a tree, sweat pouring off his face, when he thumbs the detonator. He doesnt see the blast, but feels it

push the tree against his back.

Thatll do for a congratulatory pat, he smiles thinly to himself. Then he settles back to listen for the first incoming barrage. The fleet will have detected the radar going down, and they wont want to waste any time.

This areas clear, though, so hes safe to sit here and rest a while.

Later, he helps his partner down onto the beach, shouts around for a medic, knowing theres got to be one amongst all the grunts traipsing off the landing craft and spreading out over the sand. There is, and Rangers grateful to hand his partner over. Its a weight off his shoulders and a load off his mind.

Hey, bro. Heard you did us proud.

Ranger glances up. Its Kirst! Talk about a sight for sore eyes, he laughs, scarcely able to believe it. Whatre you doing here? This is practically the front line.

She trots up to him, gives him a brisk hug. Her face and her uniform look too clean, totally out of place on Island G12. All the same, hes damn glad to see her. She backs off, careful to keep it looking official for the sake of the onlookers.

They moved us up, wanted us in place before the assault.

Hence all the delays, realises Ranger.

Yeah, sorry you had to stick your butt out longer than planned. Wasnt my doing, bro. Im only a workhorse, you know. She motions a couple of her own men past; watches as they start unloading construction materials and tools in the nearest available spot on the beach. Then shes back to looking Ranger up and down. Well be getting our boys installed here, then Ill be back out there, working on the artificial reefs, keeping the enemys big ships well clear of our new property. What about you?

Dont know, Ranger shrugs. They were talking about rotating me out of the field.

Some hush-hush project or other. Always got something up their sleeves. And now that your bros got himself wounded, he flashes her

his forearm and a smile to go with the graze, maybe theyll pull me back for a while. I could do with some R&R.

Like youre gonna get that! She laughs, but not for long. You take care, bro. Stay in touch.

Will if I can.

Its a vain hope, of course. The currents of the war are even more changeable than the back of Rangers hand. But he salutes his sister anyway, and promises hell be thinking of her.

The two guards break off their murmured conversation and stand to attention as Ranger reaches the door. He returns a curt salute, a hint of disapproval in his gaze. The guards look suitably humbled as they stand aside to admit him into the cell.

Ranger checks the files on the three prisoners. Nothing special, any of them, but theyve all been selected for the new programme. Even the one who spilled everything he had. Ranger doubts hell be too happy when he hears the news.

Even on paper it looks bad enough. If hes honest with himself, Ranger has to admit that he knows the process well enough; theyve briefed him on it and had him witness the tests on those squealy little primates. Still, he cant quite make the jump from that to the reality of what hes about to tell these poor saps in the holding cell.

The first lucky three.

All he can do is shake his head and get on with the job in hand. Ours is not to reason why … Sometimes, though, its better to die than to do. That was something his sister would say occasionally when she heard some nasty rumour about the latest thing the company was up to; and Ranger would always have to tell her to keep that kind of thought to herself, although he couldnt deny that he knew what she meant. It was something hed thought about again when theyd run him through the demos on the test subjects. But its not something hes going to allow himself to think about now.

He walks on in.

Doctor! Peri cries out, and the Doctor is pleased to discover that she has her voice back, at least inside her mind. But the sounds she makes are tortured and unpleasant, her words like tiny explosions. You have to get me out of here! Those crabs are coming your way! Theyre

killing everything, and its all to do with this this Memory thing! Somehow this Meathooks gotten hold of the knowledge in this thing, and hes using it to lead them! Theyre all linked into the Memory, Doctor! Kill it and the shock might destroy them all! You have to kill it!

Get me out of here and waste it, slaughter it, exterminate it! Wipe it out!

The Doctor doesnt have time for this; he is pained to realise that he doesnt have time for Peri, not just now. Its a truth he has to hide from her. Hes preoccupied

absorbed trawling through a sea of images. Memories. He divides off a piece of his mind, just to give her an answer: No, Peri! You know I cant do that! This Memory is the key! Its been traumatised, just like you. Whatever its done to you, its not personal. These crabs have been feeding on it, and that has exacerbated the trauma, and traumatised them in turn. Its become a vicious cycle! Theyve discovered some truth about themselves, about whats been happening here, and Im going to have to find that same truth if Im going to put things right.

If I can just break through, then I can break that cycle. If I can find the root of it, I might be able to heal it! And set you free! You have to be

Noooooooooooo!

Peris scream is the longest sound he has ever heard. It echoes on inside him even as her thoughts continue their assault on him. Dont tell me that, Doctor! Dont tell me to be patient! The viciousness of her thoughts take him by surprise. We dont have time! There is a sullen, desperate weight to her plea. Theyre coming!

But the Doctor does his best to ignore her and carries on fishing in the Memory. In Ranger.

The scientist guy handles the test subjects brain, dropping it neatly into its new home, like putting the chicken or maybe the yolk back into the egg. A whole different egg. The scientist guy is so full of enthusiasm for his work, hes pretty much indifferent to the look of disgust curling up Rangers face.

We graft on the vital organs, sensory gear, limbs and manipulative appendages. Hes explaining with distasteful keenness. Surgerys a lot more productive and cost-effective than genetic engineering, and produces better results in a shorter timescale. These little fellows start

with a full range of experience to go with their innate intelligence. Thats invaluable in the field. Something you couldnt get straight out of a test tube.

That right? says Ranger, trying to sound just as indifferent. And what do these little guys think of their new bodies?

The scientist guy blinks at him. What can they possibly think, Lieutenant? Theyre animals. One of these primates falls out of a tree, breaks its leg, what do you suppose it thinks about that? It hurts, but ultimately its just a change of state.

Something it has to get on with, adjust to. These little fellows are highly adaptable, take it from me.

Theyll have to be, out there. says Ranger, wanting an end to the conversation.

In the quiet of the lab, though, his thoughts insist on carrying on.

Ranger is shattered. This tour of duty is taking its toll, and then some. He wonders when theyll let him go back to field ops. Its got to be easier dodging bullets.

Hes standing around a lot now, and nearly falling over on his feet, its got him so drained. Talk about dead tired! But its not what theyve got him doing, as such. No, its all the thinking. Too much damned thinking.

Hes felt this way ever since he witnessed those tests, if hes totally honest with himself. You kid yourself that you can put stuff out of your mind, but you cant. It might be further back, buried a bit deeper, but its still there. Its not going anywhere.

He thinks about those tests now. Those primates.

So this is how it goes. Youre a chirpy little primate, happily playing in your trees and such. Then along comes some company grunt, and suddenly youre commandeered for a research programme. Your original form gets stripped from you, like its nothing more than a uniform, and becomes food for the Memory. Your brains all thats left of you, and they come and pluck that from the wall, like some horror-story harvest. Then youre dropped into a cosy little plaspex shell, and all sorts of different organs, eyestalks and pincers get grafted on. Youre a whole new you. In a compact new package.

Lets hope to hell youre not claustrophobic! Ranger attempts a quiet laugh.

But even if youre not, what do you think about it?

Well, yeah, maybe that scientist guy knew what he was talking about.

Maybe you just get on with it, you adapt. And with operators giving you simple commands guidance via the Memory maybe you even have a new start in life.

Somebody telling you what to do.

Better off, in that respect, than before.

Thats how Ranger rationalises it for the primates.

Today, though, the strain is beginning to tell as he signs for the nth batch of POWs and orders them to file into the passage for a final body search and cell assignment.

Since those tests were carried out, the research programme has advanced to a whole new phase. Upgrades. The POWs are all glancing about terrified, like theyve walked in on someone elses nightmare. The Memory has that effect on a lot of them.

A choked gasp has him glancing along the line.

He nearly chokes in turn.

Previously, hes never been able to bridge the gap between what hes seen in the tests and what he knows they do to these prisoners. Now, in this one fateful instant, the bridge is suddenly built, and its ready to collapse and take him down with it.

He can feel the weight of it, dragging at his eyes and his brain and the pit of his gut.

He cant believe it. Its Kirst.

Suddenly hes nervous, hes lost his edge. Whatre you doing here? he cant stop himself from asking. This is some sort of a mistake. Ill sort it out with the brass. Its got to be a mistake.

But she doesnt want to meet his gaze. His sister seems profoundly unhappy to see him.

Sir, I

Request denied

But

Request denied.

Sir, I respectfully

Respectfully nothing! Request denied. You swore an oath, soldier! That oath is thicker than blood; do I make myself clear? She messed up, she cost us men and supplies. If itll help, just look on it as giving her a second chance in a new unit.

Either way, you will see this one through like any other. To the end, is that understood? Is that understood!

Yes, sir. To the bitter end.

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Theyre breaking in! Theyre breaking in!

Scrounger hears the Doctors voice as an underlying echo to the warning resonating in his mind. The Doctor is speaking, and he is speaking inside Scrounger, just the way his special friend used to speak when it issued orders and updates during the war.

The unfamiliar voice married to the familiar sense makes for an ill-matched couple.

Still, Scrounger gets the message; and the urgency of it tells him that something needs to be done.

I need time! I need time! Hold them off! Hold them off! As best as you can! As best as you can!

Scrounger has no plan in mind; and any plan would be unlikely to survive, anyway, in the face of the opposition. He knows its Meathook. It has to be. Still, he and his friends will rally to the Doctors aid.

Theyll have to think on their feet, is all.

Scrounger wonders what went through the minds of the three hundred Spartans when they faced their overwhelming opposition in that narrow pass. He also wonders why the Memory would bother to retain

knowledge of such event. What relevance can it have had to the war? But for Scrounger, it has relevance to the coming battle today, and he has to wonder if its not something from the Memory at all, but something he knows himself. The idea is ridiculous though: Scrounger is only a designer-soldier, a walking toolbox. Everything about him has a use.

Like the remaining half of his lighting array, for instance. It provides illumination.

And inspiration.

Bucket has taken his own sweet time, but hes on his way back now, tentatively trailing a neural fibre from the passage wall. Dungbeetle has exercised a bit more care this time, riding high in Buckets bucket to scissor one end of the fibre free.

On being lowered down, he clambers out, leaving the rest to Bucket. Pulses shoot along the fibre and spark impotently from the severed end. Its like a limp sparkler clutched in Buckets claw.

Crane waits off to one side, visible but nestled as deep as he can go into the fleshy wall. Dungbeetle darts in under Cranes flank to join Scuttlebutt in hiding, both of them tucking in their eyestalks well in advance.

The membrane just ahead of them suddenly swells upwards, and the first sets of pincers push their way through as the invading army breaches the Memorys flimsy barriers. Enemy eyestalks flick this way and that, trying to adjust to the interior lighting.

Scrounger doesnt give them the time. He signals Bucket by snatching in his eyestalks. Bucket pulls his own eyes safely down, too, and touches the neural fibre to the charger on the lighting array. None of the Beach community sees it, but Scrounger feels his lamps flare up brighter than ever before: star-bright, just for an instant.

Then he and his friends are the strobing afterimage: a five-crab mêlée tearing around and into the invaders; chopping at their limbs, pincer-arms and dazzled eyestalks; setting about them with claws, drills, rivet-guns and every available mechanism in their collective arsenal. Making mincemeat of the butchers.

Amid the frenzied massacre, Scrounger assesses his burned-out lighting array and tries to remain philosophical: he will simply have to find a replacement at some point in the future.

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Perihelion. The point of Peris closest brush with the sun. Magnesium heat torched every thought and seared whatever fine threads still held her together. Scorched her wings. Then she was plummeting in every direction; breaking up like a signal; having jammed, dispersed waves of her consciousness flung out beyond the remotest orbits.

The shattered core of herself was all she was left with. The ruins of a system once called Perpugilliam Brown.

Only the Doctors voice, injected into each hairline fracture, lent her some degree of cohesion. It was a centre of gravity around which she could gather the pieces of herself back in again.

Through the eyes of the woman, shed come face to face? with her own brain. She had been utterly defeated by the sight, and seen the Doctor defeated by it too. Yeah, she figured, as her thoughts began to crystallise once more, that qualified as an all-time low.

Rock bottom would be a few thousand storeys above her head about now. If she had a head.

Tremors like hysterical laughter shook through her consciousness, threatening another disintegration. She got a rein on it, and hunted around in the Memory for something, anything, that she could focus on. Something that might actually help. She thought of herself as a little kid, searching the depths of the closet for her favourite toy monkey God, what was his name? so that she would have something to hold in the dark of night. Reaching for something.

Doctor! It was a warning shed shouted countless times before. It sounded even more desperate when she had no mouth with which to make herself heard.

Peri is the woman. Shes borrowed some of Rangers ammunition to reload her rifle.

Now shes armed and dangerous. At least, shes doing her best to be dangerous, pulling back on the trigger and, as the rifle fires, fighting to keep the barrel down where it needs to be. Theres all sorts of recoil-absorption going on inside the weapon, but her arms are like those of a newborn against the force of each burst of fire.

Sprays of bullets chop some of the crabs into pieces as they shove and slice their way in through the membrane. But for each good hit, there

are two bad misses, and Peri pays for each one in spades, the pain digging piercing holes in her consciousness.

The woman functions on automatic for a few seconds each time Peri slips out of her, but soon even she begins to reel. She grows dizzy from shock after shock as more bullets pit and scar the interior surfaces of the Memory.

To Peri, thats like seeing her home crumble apart around her so much the worse because she is actually a part of these walls, and these walls are a part of her.

The woman beats a hurried retreat, crouching down behind the next bend for cover.

Peri sits inside, feeling both her own fear and the fear of her human shell: a double coating of sweat, real and imagined. Shes losing ground all the time if ground

is the right word for this salivating passageway along which the invaders scuttle and crawl in ever-increasing numbers.

Three more rapid bursts of fire chew up a mess of crabs as they scramble over each other in their eagerness to attack. Two better-aimed bursts ricochet, sparking, off the metal mountain of a crab thats storming its way to the front. Its Meathook, his claws scissoring the air like great shears, eager for a bite of something more substantial.

Three more bursts. A bloody cloud of shell and meat.

Empty.

Peris panic infects the woman. Fingers fumble at the magazine release. The invading army snaps up the ground in no time. Peri kicks back, the woman does too. The woman topples flat on her back, Peri inside her. Mother inside the child.

Meathook clambers on top of her, scuttles up the length of her, his pincers sticking into her like thick knitting needles. She squirms and writhes and shoves herself backwards, but hes too heavy to throw off. Eyes on stalks, like buds of pure evil, stare deep inside her. Through her and into Peri.

Peri screams, but the womans mouth opens a fraction later. Its too late to make a sound. Air squeezes out of a severed windpipe. Pain escapes under pressure, a flood of it pouring back into Peri. The womans sight

grows dim, and Meathook is the brute, ugly darkness at the end of her tunnel.

The woman is dying, within a few days of her birth. And as Meathook crawls on over her face, leaving her throat open and bleeding into the floor of the Memory, Peri feels this borrowed life of hers a dimension not only of sight, but of sound, touch, smell, taste, all her physical senses on short-term loan receding from her like a tide that wont return.

And she realises, agonisingly, that she wont even be able to shed any tears for the death of her offspring.

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There are no more attackers coming through the membrane, but Bucket decides to remain on station just in case. Scrounger has heard Peris cries though, and it occurs to him that if he can do anything anything at all then he should try. Crane is with him, which is a leg-up for his courage; and even Dungbeetle and Scuttlebutt are all set to accompany him.

Scrounger leads the way, running fast along the passageway, recalling the route in his mind as quickly as he covers the distance. They are racing the neural pulses through the Memory.

But they are still not fast enough.

Meathook has found his way to the heart quicker than any of them. And he has found some other cause, burning inside, deeper than revenge. Scrounger and his friends cannot be sure what it is; they cannot delve into Meathooks mind the way they can dip into the Memory. But Scrounger suspects it is survival. And Meathook has calculated that the biggest threat to his survival, right now, is the Doctor trespassing in the Memory.

A threat that, as Scrounger and his friends enter the chamber, Meathook is about to remove by neatly clipping the Doctors jugular.

Scrounger, Dungbeetle, Scuttlebutt and Crane are still a community. They race in together and latch onto Meathook, anywhere they can get a hold on his armour or his limbs. They pull together too, with all their strength.

Scuttlebutt is the first to be flung off, his damaged claw unable to get a firm enough grip on the monster. Meathook raises himself further

up, great pincers snapping just millimetres short of the Doctors throat. Scrounger, meanwhile, has grasped one of the monsters legs and is dragging with all his might. Hes just considering firing up his welder and torching Meathooks closest eye when the monster swipes back with his fighting claw and knocks him hard to the ground.

Crane locks onto Meathooks other claw, but the monster struggles with him only briefly before promptly pruning his left eyestalk and watching him drop like a stone.

Crane staggers back onto his feet but sways giddily, and theres no way hell make the climb to fight the monster a second time. Not quickly enough to save the Doctor.

Only Dungbeetle is left, scuttling this way and that over Meathooks armour as though looking for a way in. But there is no more time; and besides, as Scrounger knows now more than ever, Meathook is invincible.

Finally, Meathook bucks his whole body and hurls Dungbeetle off him. Free of any troublesome pests, he closes in to take the killing bite out of the Doctors throat.

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Then theres the one about the Intelligence Officer, the Medical Officer and the Ranger.

The Ranger sits in introspective silence, hugging himself because theres no-one else to do it for him. His knees are drawn up in the bed and he stares at nothing, as if hes completely in his own world. But hes not: hes listening to every tiny sound in the field hospital, and he can even hear some of the fainter sounds stealing in from outside.

The Intelligence Officer and the Medical Officer are standing over his bed, talking about him, and they have no idea that he can hear them. He is ignored, hidden in plain sight, eavesdropping on their every word.

The Medical Officer calls up data on his hand computer, passes it to the Intelligence Officer for examination. The patient is depressive, irritable, shows signs of extreme fatigue coupled with bouts of nervous energy; hes phonophobic, suffers from

Spare me the full litany of symptoms. The Intelligence Officer hands back the computer. Whats wrong with him?

Post-traumatic stress.

What? I thought that went out with neural inhibitors.

Well, its very rare these days, Ill grant you, but not unheard of. As the sphere of military-style operations expands, so does the scope for shock and trauma, I suppose. Theres no telling what a man might encounter in the course of duty on all these alien worlds.

This ones not all that alien. Tell me, does he talk about anything? Anything unusual?

He has nightmares, and sometimes hell wake up, screaming about gardens of human brains, human brains in robot shells. Its all garbled, and the words come out in fits. It takes three orderlies to hold him down just so we can administer a sedative.

Ah, clearly nonsense.

I imagine so, yes.

Im just following orders. He worked on a number of sensitive projects and covert operations. We need to make sure he doesnt represent a security liability.

I understand. Well, I dont think hes a liability to anyone but himself, to be frank.

Well, once hes cleared, well take him off your hands, see to it that hes shipped back home to his family.

Does he have family?

But the Ranger stops listening at this point. He knows that tone in the Intelligence Officers voice; he can read every implication and see whats in store for him. The Ranger knows he has to get the hell out of here.

So he does, as soon as he is able. But the irony is that the Intelligence Officer, the Medical Officer and the whole damn company get the hell out all of them, off the whole damn planet not long after his escape. And he ends up alone, in a cave, asking himself, over and over, what was it all for?

Its a weak punchline to a very sick joke.

Ranger has had enough. Hes not sure if having had enough is

sufficient reason to do what hes going to do; but, after all, maybe there is more to it than that.

Redemption? Nothing so grand. Release? Possibly, and not only for himself. So maybe this is a selfless act of sorts, and maybe that is all the reason he needs.

Clasping the great body of Meathook in both arms, he tears the creature off the Doctor and hurls himself across the chamber. He lands, as hed meant to, right on top of Meathook, and the creature starts clawing furiously at his abdomen, trying to dig his way to freedom.

Ranger quickly reaches under himself and pulls a grenade loose, leaving the pin clipped to his belt. The explosion will be death for himself and Meathook.

Ranger embraces his sister for the last time.

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The link is abruptly severed, but still the Doctor reels from the shock whether of the blast or of the moment, his brain far too foggy to be sure. Its understandable, bearing in mind he is slightly concussed. The effort of interfacing with the Memory has left him drained, too, and he is in danger of slipping away, cast adrift in an ocean of oblivion.

Again, it is Scrounger who comes to his rescue, dragging him back ashore by nipping lightly at his face with his pincers.

Needle and haystack. Finding the one within the other neednt be as difficult as it sounded, given sufficient time and the appropriate sensory apparatus. It was, in fact, nothing to what Peris resurrection was asking of the Doctor. He was effectively having to reconstruct the haystack, straw by straw; to pinpoint precisely each and every needle, each and every painful moment that helped make Peri who she was, and return it to its rightful position within the stack.

Brain surgery, by comparison, was a hobby for the ham-fisted.

He was distilling the particles of her consciousness from the surrounding organism, applying his own mind as a filter. It was a painstaking process, to say the least, and a painful one at that, as the Doctor found himself, courtesy of Rangers interface hastily adapted for the purpose sifting through fragments of his companions mind that she would scarcely ever allow herself to see, let alone expose to

the scrutiny of others, even the most trusted of friends. All her agonies and costly ecstasies, all her guilts and shames; fractures in the window of Peri Browns soul.

Although irreparable, they were intended to remain invisible as she pressed on with her life. But in piecing his friend back together, the Doctor could not help but see the cracks.

He felt them just as keenly.

And realised in the same instant that it was in his power to effect repairs.

Temptation confronted him like a demon, offering him a divine gift: you can heal this girl, Doctor, make her whole without holes, put her back together as you see fit.

No! I can, but I may not!

She would never notice her missing pieces; especially those that hurt her so much.

Painstaking: take her pains. Why heal her and leave all the shrapnel inside?

Because the shrapnel is part of her. Its not for me to play God!

The Doctor thought that loud and hard; an apology that would remain forever unvoiced to the patient.

Still, as he rebuilt the haystack, straw by lonely straw, he couldnt resist gently filing away at the needles, rounding off some of the sharper points and taking the residual grains deep inside himself.

He was far from immune to such shocks himself. But at the same time, he knew that he was blessed with a longer lifespan over which he could spread their effects. Several longer lifespans.

Pinpricks. Drops of blood in an ocean of time.

Peri Browns body, meanwhile, still lay a-mouldering in the sponge. In principle, the Doctor had no prejudices against being accompanied by disembodied minds. In practice, though, he knew that he would have to do something to restore her physical form. For one thing, he was fond of humans in general; for another, he couldnt face the prospect of Peri constantly whining about how he had done nothing to recover

her body.

In this task, Peri was able to point the way, illustrating how she had seeded the womans growth from the cells of the Memory.

Ah yes, deduced the Doctor, a system for rewarding the best performers with replacement bodies at the end of a satisfactory tour of duty. Under development but abandoned, like everything else here. He pictured the crab creatures, gathered round and waiting on some proclamation, some words of guidance for their future.

Ill do everything I can, Peri, he promised, crossing both his hearts.

The necessary system refinements and modifications took the best part of a couple of days to effect or rather, the worst part, with a lot stress and perspiration generated by the need circumvent whole patches of the sponges neural infrastructure where damage from the feeding marine life had spread internally. This damage had shaken the Memory considerably, and rendered its defences nervous of even apparently authorised tampering.

Once thats complete, the Doctor had assured Peri, itll be just a matter of isolating your DNA sequence from all the other knowledge stored in the Memory, then programming in those parameters to set a new growth in motion. Before too long, therell be a whole new Peri flowering from an internal wall.

The Doctor eventually found her, naked and shivering, in one of the passages. Her hair was only just inching into being and likely to grow back very slowly, but still far faster than her spirits would ever recover from the shock of all she had experienced.

Whipping off his coat, he wrapped it around her, like armour of impossibly cheerful colours. Then he wrapped his arms around her too, for added protection. And let the newborn Peri cry out her first tears against his broad shoulder.

Under the soft, warm shell of the Doctors coat, Peri was naked and new born, and acutely conscious of both these facts. She had a new body, inviolate, fresh, unscathed, free of sin. But inside, she was old, broken, and all too aware that the true violation was of herself; and she was still very much herself, despite the new shell she inhabited.

When her hair grew back, there would be no scars left to mark the surface. Peri herself would help see to that. But underneath, deep inside, there would still be wrecks, old and recent, littering the

deepest parts of her.

Doctor, I But the words exploded into raw sobs again.

There, there, the Doctor said, and his arms held her close. It was all he could bring himself to say.

And, right then, it was all Peri wanted to hear.

Scrounger, my lad, a word in your shell-like, if you dont mind!

The Doctor looked down as Scrounger raised his eyestalks. To the crab-like engineer he must have resembled a living statue, towering above the sand.

They had returned to the Beach for one last funeral. The last for a while, at least, the Doctor hoped.

Rangers grave dominated the small cemetery. No more than half a dozen crabs the friends who had seen fit to bring his body with them drew close enough to hear the Doctors quietly spoken eulogy. All the others, crowded together on the Beach, merely waited out the Ceremony, interested to hear some more pertinent words from the Doctor concerning their future. Their whole world looked to him for guidance.

At length, he turned to address the throng.

First of all, thank you for your help in recovering the TARDIS. Im sure I couldnt have managed it without you. He swept a grateful smile over the entire assembly.

All of you, he added, his gaze taking in the TARDIS herself, standing inches now above the creeping tide.

The creatures had worked together to raise the ship with a skilfully improvised flotation rig, in which they had then left her while they towed her all the way to the Beach. It had been an epic undertaking to rival the transportation of stones to Stonehenge.

Such marvels aside, the Doctor was conscious that Peri was inside the ship, and possibly as much in need of some company as she was in need of some time alone. He had to be brief and to the point, but couldnt just leave without giving these creatures something.

Even if that something was only a few grains of hope.

The Memory must be allowed to heal. And there must be no more feeding on it, he cautioned. To that end, I have introduced something of a deterrent: a neurovirus that should induce the most painful of headaches in any one of you who chooses to disregard my warnings and take so much as a nibble. This was a lie, in fact, but one that he felt confident none of these creatures, given their respect for his perceived wisdom, would put to the test. Still, you all share a bond with it, and once its properly on the mend, it should reinstate itself as a highly useful resource; a database of knowledge into which you can all tap and share in the rebuilding of your community; the shaping of your brave new world.

He paused to wonder if that was a mite over the top; but to gauge by all the eyestalks standing well aloft, his speech was having the desired effect.

Reluctantly, he struck a slightly sour note. Its possible that the corporation responsible for all this will want to return some day. Dont fear that day, but work towards it. By that time, its my hope and it should be yours that you will have built something worth defending; and with your adaptability, your resilience and your ingenuity, I know you will be able to defend it with a minimum of bloodshed. Hold onto it and never let go.

There was, of course, no telling exactly what they might build together. The Doctor made a mental note to return some day to see how they had fared. It was, though, just one more mental note added to a very long list.

Rebuilding a community in the aftermath of a war was at least as daunting a challenge as reconstructing a personality shattered by trauma. The community might live on, but it is never the same. The damage, be it loss suffered or horror experienced, is always irrevocable. The damage itself is taken on board, absorbed into the heart, to shape something new. The way a scar changes a face. Never the same.

A ship is sunk. Very quickly the water heals all traces of its passage below. But the map of the ocean bed is forever altered. But then marine life moves in to colonise and thrive in the new shelter granted by providence from the world above. New life, new conditions, a changed environment. Never the same, but something new and hopefully something stronger.

These crabs had one advantage, in that they had been created by the

war; they had no past community with which to compare whatever they founded now. Still, it was war they had been created for, and only time would tell how they adapted to peace.

Repair, though, was only the reverse of sabotage, construction the flip side of destruction.

The Doctor had every faith in them, as they appeared to have so much faith in him.

They would, he anticipated with a wry smile, do very well, with their natural ability to approach life sideways on.

Some among that sea of eyestalks wavered uncertainly, as if expecting something more.

But it was time, he realised, to leave them to it. Their world was no longer his affair; it was theirs and theirs alone. He had no wish to remain here, towering above them like some statue in the sand. They could manage well enough without him.

They would have to.

The Doctor turned abruptly and strolled back to the TARDIS, arcing down to follow the waters edge as he went. He was aware, in doing so, that all but a few of his footsteps would be washed away come high tide. He wondered what sort of a universe it would be, if scars could be as easily erased.

As his key turned in the TARDIS lock, his thoughts turned directly to Peri. Leaving, as usual, everything else behind him.

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Scrounger dips his eyes; a human expression.

Ranger isnt Ranger any more. The Doctor buried him before he left.

Confronting the cold memory of a dead friend, Scrounger knows that there is no Ranger now. Not even so much as a soul clinging to this world. Maybe, though, Ranger is adrift in an ocean of energy, invisible as the wind sweeping around the globe; in a forever that makes us all small. At least, thats what Scrounger thinks imagines.

Scrounger became so much more when he was tied to his friend by

lines that transcended distance. All that gain from just a little of Rangers blood. And now all the corresponding loss. What will he be without Ranger? How will he learn more about himself?

He knows that the Doctor and Ranger both departed with a secret; a secret that neither of them chose to share with him. It was something that Ranger learned from the Memory about his little bro. Or something that Ranger knew all along. Something that Scrounger was apparently better off not knowing about himself.

It makes Scrounger feel like a castaway. Alone and afraid. Afraid, most of all, of truths he might not be able to handle. Or perhaps more than that, he resents having been kept in the dark. His old, special friend used to keep so much from him. Maybe his special friend hadnt been that special after all. just an operator feeding him orders for the war effort: spy on this submarine pen, mine that harbour, sink this tanker.

He needs to spend a day or two away from here. Away from the Beach and away from Rangers grave. They were too much alike, he and Ranger. Soldiers. All used up and tossed aside like well, like empty shells.

The Beach defences need constant enhancement. Scrounger decides to pop out to the wrecked frigate tomorrow, to recover another couple of torpedo warheads.

But from where will he salvage some answers for himself?

The Memory knows them, but Scrounger cant sift through its darkest depths. Ranger knew them, but he died with them. The Doctor discovered them, but he is gone. All Scrounger has left are questions. All the same ones as before, all painfully magnified.

But maybe maybe that tumour isnt dead yet; maybe its special cells are clinging to life, buried in Rangers brain. Maybe there is something to salvage here after all.

If the future really is going to be about building a brave new world, then Scrounger has no desire to go into that world ignorant of his own identity, of his own place in the scheme of things. Scrounger needs that knowledge if only to stay ahead of the competition. For survivals sake.

Because Scrounger doesnt entirely share the Doctors optimism for the future. There are a few too many aggressive types here on the Beach,

too many competitors. So maybe a new world awaits them; but Scrounger has the nagging anxiety that it will be much the same as the old one, holding nothing for him and his community but the prospect of more war.

We can go on evolving, Scrounger supposes, cladding ourselves in better and better armour, affixing all kinds of tools and weaponry, but maybe, ultimately, thats all our advances will ever amount to: disputes over turf; battles over shells.

The future will turn up its own answers, though. He knows that. And still he will be left with question marks haunting his past, his origins. Where will he find the answers? The past, like Ranger, is a dead thing, and can tell him nothing. Or can it?

When Scrounger thinks of the tumour, he can almost picture the real Ranger: his brain, pink-grey flesh, its complex paths stained dark with blood; the meat and thought of him, nestled in its shell. just like me, he realises. And he wonders what that means. Was that part of the secret that Ranger found within him? Some morsel that had him repeating the ancient question, again and again: Who am I? Maybe the answers are still alive, in the cells of that special tumour.

Hmm. Burrowing in the sand, unearthing his friend, is a questionable act, but a simple one, practically speaking. And the walls of the human skull, Scrounger knows, are relatively thin and easily broken open, posing no great challenge for his various cutters and powerful pincers.

Hmm. Scrounger scuttles forward, claw snipping delicately.

Best tuck in now, while its still fresh in his mind.

About the Author

Simon Forward was born in Penzance in 1967. He dabbled in computer programming, but from the age of eleven he wanted to be a writer when he grew up. He is now a published author, with two Doctor Who novels, Drift (2002) and Emotional Chemistry (2003) for BBC Books, a number of Doctor Who short stories for the BBC and Big Finish, as well as an audio drama, The Sandman, for Big Finish and no doubt an expanding waistline under his belt. He lives to write, as opposed to writing to live, developing other SF novels and stories, as well as some works of contemporary fiction, in the constant hope of being able to do both. Oh, and hes still waiting to grow up.